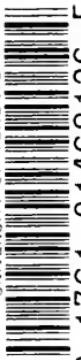


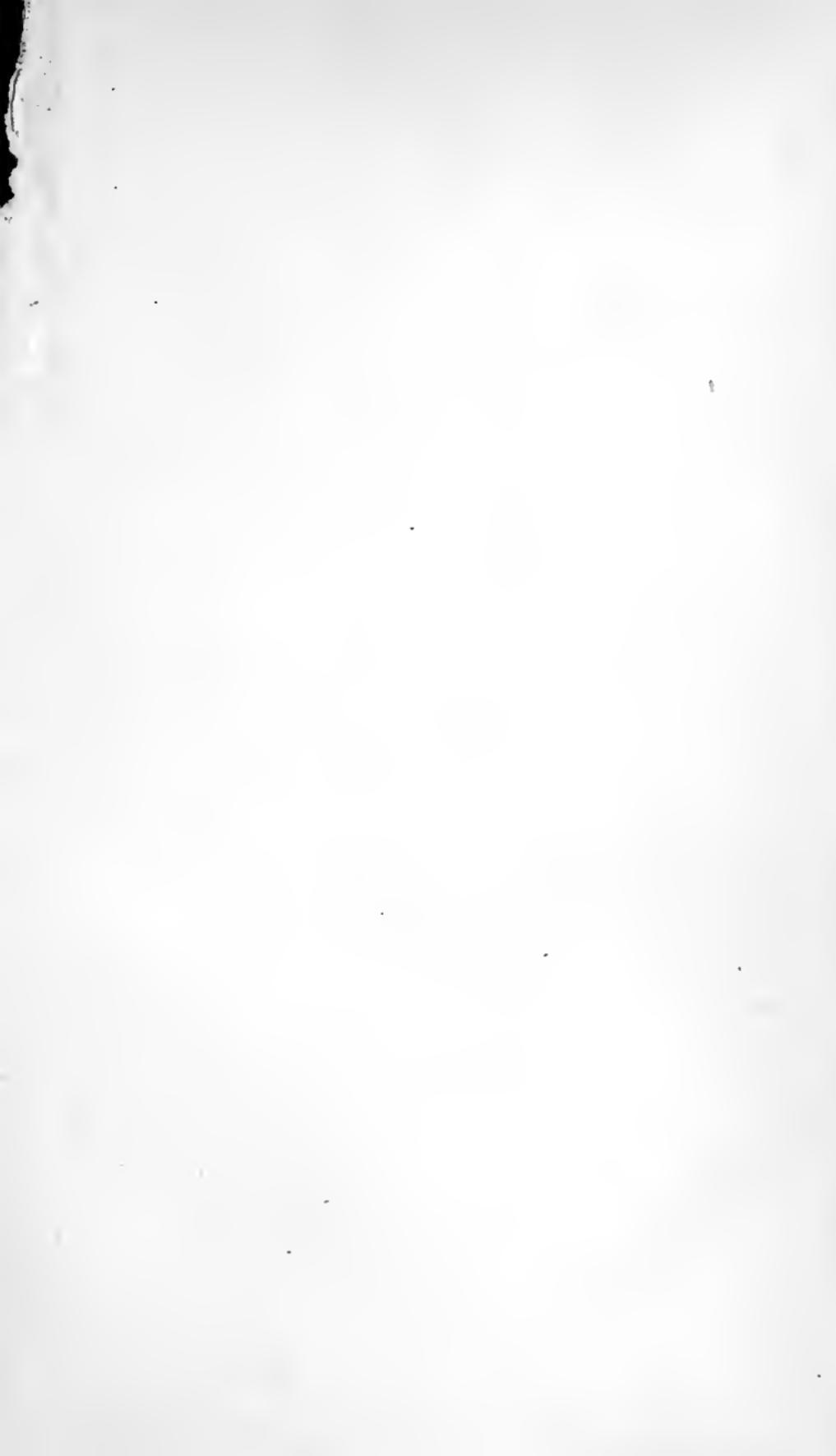
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THE STORY OF VALENTINE
AND HIS BROTHER

“I LOST MY CHILDREN;
IF THESE BE THEY, I KNOW NOT HOW TO WISH
A PAIR OF WORTHIER SONS.”

—*Cymbeline.*

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STORY OF VALENTINE
AND HIS BROTHER

BY

MRS OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF "CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD," ETC.

NEW EDITION

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TO

MY ETON BOYS

C. F. O.

F. R. O.

F. W.

THE STORY OF VALENTINE;

AND HIS BROTHER.

CHAPTER I.

Two ladies were seated in a great dim room, partially illuminated by fits and starts with gleams of firelight. The large windows showed a pale dark sky, in which twilight was giving place to night, and across which the brown branches of the trees, rough with the buds of March, tossed wildly in a hurricane of wind, burdened with intermittent blasts of rain—rain that dashed fiercely against the windows a handful at a time, then ceased till some new cloud was ready to discharge its angry shower. Something fiercely personal and furious was in the storm. It looked and felt like something not addressed to the world in general, but aimed individually by some angry spirit of the elements at the people who lived here high up above the brawling Esk amid the brown wintry woods at Rosscraig House.

The drawing-room was large, lofty, and full of old-fashioned furniture which would have enchanted a connoisseur. The two ladies, who were its only occupants, were scarcely discernible at first, though the firelight, gleaming about among the still life, caught here a green reflection from a wonderful cabinet of rarest Vernis-Martin, and there entangled itself in the bevelled sides of a strange old mirror, used to reflecting wizards. It was more easy to make out these accessories of existence than it was to identify the two voices which occupied and reigned over this still and dark-

ling chamber. They were in one corner of the room near the fire ; one, the prevailing voice, was soft but strong, with the vigour in it of mature life, just roughened here and there by a touch of age, which gave it an *aigre-doux* of distinct character—and came from an ample dark shadow in a great chair turned towards the fire. The other, which gave forth only monosyllabic sounds of assent or wonder, sweet and tender, but feeble, belonged to a smaller person near the first, and facing her—whose countenance, turned towards the window, showed like a pale whiteness in the dark. This was the central light, the highest tone in the picture, except the pale gleaming of the sky from the windows, and the fitful red flash from the fire.

“Richard’s story,” said the stronger voice, “cannot be supposed to be very interesting to any but ourselves. If it is for mere curiosity, Mary——”

“Curiosity!”—there was a tone of reproach in the soft repetition—a reproach and an appeal.

“That was unkind. I did not mean it. I meant interest, friendship ; but Mary, Mary, friendship is weak, and interest a poor bit feeble echo of feeling to them that are all bound up in one life, as I have been in my son !”

Here there was a little pause, and then the younger voice answered, faltering, “I have known him all my life. I have seen few men but him——”

This was preliminary to the story which old Lady Eskside had begun to tell when I opened to you, gentle reader, the door of this great dim room. She was deep in it by the time we shadows entered, among the shadows, to listen. And most of us can figure to ourselves what a mother would be likely to say of her only child—the child not of her youth even, which puts a kind of equality between mother and son, and brings them together, as it were, upon one table-land of life, sooner or later—but the child of her mature age, and therefore always a child to her. What she said of him I need not repeat. The reader will make acquaintance with the man for himself, a different creature from the man as seen through his mother’s eyes.

“Perhaps it is not a thing to remark to you,” said the old lady, who was old enough not only to retain a Scotch accent, but to use occasionally a word peculiar to the north, —“but, Mary, you are not a bit girlie unacquainted with the world. You will recognise Richard in this that he mar-

ried the woman.—God forgive me ! I'm sorely tempted to think sometimes that vice is less deadly for this world than virtue. You know what most men would have done—they would have taken the girl as they would have gathered a flower ; and neither she nor one belonging to her knew better, nor expected better ; but my Richard, God bless him ! was a fool, Mary,—he was a fool ! His father says so, and what can I say different ? He has always been a fool in that way, thank God ! He married the woman ; and then he sent to me when it was all over and nothing could be mended, to come and see, for God's sake, what was to be done."

" And you went ?"

" I went after a struggle ; I could not thole the creature,—the very name of her was odious to me. It was a ridiculous name—a play-actor's name. They called her Altamira. What do you think of that for Richard's wife ? I thought she was some shopkeeper's daughter—some scheming, dressing, half-bred woman that had made her plan to marry him because his father was Lord Eskside—though, heaven knows, it's a poor enough lordship when all's said. Perhaps we women are too apt to take that view ; naturally, when such a thing happens, we think it the woman's fault—the woman's doing. But Mary, Mary, when I saw the girl——"

" You freed her," said the other, with a sighing sound in her low voice, " from the blame ?"

" The blame !" cried the old lady, with some impatience ; then, sinking her voice low, she said hurriedly—" the girl was no shopkeeper's daughter, not even a cottage lass, nor out of a ploughman's house, or a weaver's house, or the lowest you can think. She was out of no house at all—she was a tramp. Mary, do you know what that means ?—a creature hanging about the roads and fields, at fairs and races, wherever the roughest, and the wildest, and the most miserable congregate—that was Richard's wife——"

" Oh, Lady Eskside !"

" You may well say, Oh ! As for me, if I had ever fainted in my life I would have fainted then. She was a beautiful creature ; but the sight of her brought a sickness to my very heart. She was like a wild hunted thing, frightened to death for me and everything that was civilised—looking out of her wild black eyes to see how she could escape—shrink ing back not to be touched as if she thought I would give her a blow. Blame ! you might as well blame a deer that it

let itself be taken, poor, bonnie, panting, senseless thing ! I blamed nobody, Mary ; I was just appalled, neither more nor less, at the man's folly that had done it. Think of a son of mine having so little command of himself ! The madness of it ! for it was no question of making a lady of her, a woman that could take his mother's place. She had to be tamed first out of her gipsy ways, tamed like a wild beast, and taught to live in a house, and wear decent clothes as she had never done in her life."

A low cry of dismay and wonder came from the listener's lips, and a strange pang which nobody knew of went through her heart—a pang indescribable, mingled of misery, humiliation, and a kind of guilty and bitter pride ; guilty, though she was innocent enough. This was his choice, she said to herself ; and that sharp and stinging contempt—more painful to herself than to the object of it—which a woman sometimes permits herself to feel for a man who has slighted her, shot through the gentlest soul in the world.

"I cannot tell you," said Lady Eskside, her voice sinking low so that her companion had to stoop forward to hear, "all that I went through. She broke away from us, and got back to her people more than once. Our ways were misery and bondage to her. At first she had to be dressed like a child—watched like a child. Her husband had no influence over her, and she was frightened for me : the moment she was out of our sight her whole mind was busy with schemes to get away."

"But what reason—what motive——" began the other, faltering.

"None," said Lady Eskside. "Listen, Mary ; there was one thing. She was good, as people call good ; there was no wickedness in her, as a woman. What wife meant, in any higher sense, she was ignorant of ; but there was no harm—no harm. Always remember this, whatever may happen, and whatever you may hear. I say it—Richard's mother—that can have no motive to shield her. She wanted her freedom, nothing more. She was not an ill woman ; nothing bad—in that way—was in her head. She would have put her knife into the man who spoke lightly to her, as soon as look at him. She was proud in her way of being Richard's wife. She felt the difference it made between her and others. But she was like a wild animal, or a bird. She would not be caged, and there was too deep an ignorance in her to learn.

There was no foundation to build upon—neither ambition, nor pride, nor any feeling that the like of us expect to find."

"And was there no—love?" The voice that made this inquiry trembled and had a thrill in it of feeling so mingled as to be indescribable—bitterness, wonder, pity, and a sense of contrast more overwhelming than all.

Lady Eskside did not reply at once. "Often and often I've asked myself that question," she said at length; "Was there love? How can I tell? There are different kinds of love, Mary. You and I even would love very differently, let alone you and her. With you there would be no thought of anything but of the person loved—"

"I am not at all in question, Lady Eskside," said the other, with the strangest delicate haughtiness.

"I beg your pardon," said the old lady, quickly. "You are right, my dear; there is no question of you. But still there are different kinds of love. Some think only of the person loved, as I said; but some are roused up into a kind of fierce consciousness of themselves through their very love. They feel their own individuality not less but more in consequence of it. This was that poor creature's way. Mixed with her wild cravings for the freedom she had been used to, and the wild outdoor life she had been used to, I think she had a sort of half-crazy feeling how unlike Richard she was; and this became all the stronger when I came. My dear," said Lady Eskside, suddenly, "the most untrained woman feels what another woman thinks of her far more than she feels any man's criticism. I have thought and thought on this for years, and perhaps I put my own thoughts into her mind; but I cannot help fancying that sometimes, though she did not understand me in the least, poor thing, she caught a glimpse of herself through my eyes; and what with this, and what with her longing to be out of doors, she grew desperate, and then she ran away."

The listener made no reply. I don't think she cared to hear any excuse made for the wild woman who was Richard's wife—whom Richard had chosen instead of any other, and who had thus justified his choice.

"I stayed as long as I could, and tried all I could," Lady Eskside continued, "and then there came a time when I felt it was better for me to go away. I told Richard so, and I advised him to take her abroad—where she would have nobody to fly to. And so he did, and wandered about with

her everywhere. I can't think but what she must have made some advances, in sense, at least, while they were so much together; but it takes a long time to tame a savage; it takes a long time to graft a new stock upon a wild tree."

"And have you never seen her again?"

"I saw her when her children were born. She was so far tamed then by weakness, and by the natural restraint of the circumstances," said Lady Eskside, "that I hoped she might be changed altogether. And she would talk a little—not so much as that one could find out how her mind was working—but yet a little—enough to swear by; and her voice was changed. It lost its wild sound and took finer modulations. You know how particular Richard always was in all his ways—you remember his voice."

The other drew back her chair a little. Somehow the sudden reference struck her like an arrow through and through. It was not her fault. For years she had been trying to think of Richard—as she ought to think—not too much, nor too kindly, but with gentle indifference and friendship; no, not indifference; old long friendship which may be permitted to remember. "Like his sister," she had often said to herself. But somehow these sudden words, "You remember his voice," struck poor Mary at unawares. They brought her down to the very ground. She tried with a choking sobbing sensation to get out the word "Yes." Remember it! She seemed to hear it and nothing else, till her head ached and swam, and there was a ringing in her ears.

"Ah!" Lady Eskside paused, with a wondering sense that something was going on in the dark more potent than mere interest in her story. But after a while, as even a story which is one's own takes a stronger hold upon one than the emotion of another, however deep—she recommenced, going back to herself. "Her voice had changed wonderfully. She spoke almost like an educated person—that gave me great hope. I thought, what with the children and what with this opening of new life in herself, that everything would be changed; and my heart was moved to her. When I left I kissed the children, and for the first time I kissed her; and I promised to send her a nurse, an excellent nurse I knew of, and came home quite happy. You recollect my coming home, and how proud I was of the twins—the darlings! Oh, Mary, Mary! little did I know—!"

Mary put out her hand and took that of her old friend.

She was too much moved herself to say anything. From this point she had a faint knowledge of the story, as everybody had.

"The next I heard was that she had disappeared," said the old lady;—"disappeared totally, taking the babies with her. Richard went with me so far on my way home, and while he was absent his wife disappeared. There is no other word for it; she disappeared, and no one has ever heard of her again. Oh, Mary, what news for us all! There had been some gipsy wanderers, some of her own class, about the place, we found out afterwards; and whether they carried her off, or she went of her own will, nobody knows. Sometimes I have thought she must have been carried away, but then they would not have taken the children; and sometimes I have blamed myself, and thought that what I said about the nurse may have frightened her—God knows. We sought her everywhere, Mary, as you may suppose. I went myself up and down over all the country, and Richard went to America, and I cannot tell you where. We had the police employed, and every sort of person we could think of; but we have never heard any more of her to this day."

"Nor of the children?" said Mary, drawing closer and holding still more tenderly her old friend's hand.

"Nor of the children; two bonnie boys—oh, my dear, two lovely boys!" cried the old lady, with a sob. "I never saw such sweet children. You may fancy all I had said to my old lord when I came home, about them: one was to have my property, such as it is, and the other the Eskside lands. A single heir would have been better, Lord Eskside said, in his way, you know—but he was as proud as I was. Two boys!—no fear of the old house dying out. We began to plan out the new wing we had always thought of building. Oh, Mary, now you will understand how I can never laugh when the gentlemen make a joke with my poor old lord about the new wing!"

"Dear Lady Eskside! but you must not—you must not break down—for his sake."

"No, I must never break down; and if I would I could not," said the old lady; "it's no my nature. I must keep up. I must stand firm till my last day. But, Mary, though it is my nature, I have to pay for it, as one pays for everything. Oh, the weary nights I have lain awake thinking

I heard her wandering round the house, thinking I heard her at the window trying to get in. She knew nothing about Rossraig—nothing ; but, strange enough, I always think of her coming here. When the wind's blowing as it blows to-night, when the leaves are falling in autumn—oh, Mary, have you never heard a sound like steps going round and round the house ? ”

“ It is only the leaves falling,” said Mary ; and then she added, suddenly, “ I have heard everything that the heart hears.”

“ And that’s more than the ears ever hear tell of,” said the old lady ; “ but oh, to live for years and never hear that without thinking it may be them—never to see beggar bairns on a roadside without thinking it may be them—to go watching and waiting and wondering through your life, starting at every noise, trembling at every sudden sound—God help us ! what is that—what is that ? ” she cried, suddenly rising to her feet.

“ Oh, Lady Eskside ! ” cried the other, rising too, and grasping her hand with a nervous shudder ; “ it is nothing —nothing but the storm.”

The old lady dropped heavily into her seat again. “ Sometimes I cannot bear it,” she cried—“ sometimes I cannot bear it ! I get half-crazed at every sound.”

“ The wind is very high,” said Mary, soothing her, “ and the Esk is running wild over the linn, and the storm tearing the trees. It must be the equinoctial gales. If you only heard them as we do, roaring and raging over the sea ! ”

For a few minutes the two ladies sat quite still holding each other’s hands. The storm outside was wild enough to impose silence upon those within. The trees were tossing about as if in an agony, against the pale whiteness of the sky ; now and then a deeper note would come into the tumult of sound, the hoarse roar of the river, which grew rapidly into a torrent at the foot of the hill ; and then the wind would rush, like the avenging spirit through the bleeding wood in the Inferno, tearing off the limbs of the trees, which shrieked and cried in unavailing torment. The last lingering rays of twilight had disappeared out of the sky, the last gleams of firelight were sinking too—even the mirrors had sunk out of sight upon the walls, and nothing but the large windows filled with the mournful pallor of the sky, and Mary’s pale face, a spot of congenial whiteness,

were even partially visible. After this story, and while they sat silent, conscious of the strange stillness within, and commotion outside, was it their imaginations that represented to them another sound striking into the roar of the storm? Lady Eskside did not start again as she had done before, but she grasped Mary's hand tightly; while Mary, for her part, sat bolt-upright in her chair, thinking to herself that it must be imagination, that it was a mere trick of excitement which filled her ears with echoes of fanciful knockings. Who could be knocking at this hour? or how could such a sound be heard even, in the onslaught of the storm?

What was it? what could it be? Now, was that the forlorn peal of a bell? and now a gust of cold air as if the door in opening had admitted the storm in person, which swept through the house like a mountain stream; and now a wild dash and clang as if the same door had closed again, shaking the very walls. Tighter and tighter Lady Eskside grasped Mary's hand. No words passed between them, except a faint "It is nothing—it is fancy," which came from Mary's lips unawares, and under her breath. Was it fancy? Was it some curious reverberation through the air of the countless anxieties which the old lady had hushed in her mind for years, but which until now she had never betrayed? For the next few minutes they heard their own hearts beating loud over the storm; and then there came another sound ludicrous in its methodical calm, which startled them still more than the sounds they had supposed themselves to hear.

"Something has happened, Mary!" cried Lady Eskside, withdrawing her grasp and wringing her hands. "Something has happened! some one has arrived, and Harding is coming to let us know."

"He is coming to light the lamps," said Mary, making one desperate effort to throw off the superstitious impression; and she laughed. The laugh sounded something terrible, full of mockery and contempt in the midst of the always resounding storm; the echo of it seemed to breathe all round the room, calling forth diabolical echoes. In the midst of these Harding came solemnly into the room. He was an elderly man, who had been many years in the house, and was deeply impressed by the solemnity of his own position. He came in without any light, and stood invisible at the door, another voice and nothing else. "My lady,"

said Harding, solemnly, "something has happened—something as is very mysterious and we can't understand. Would it be a great trouble to your ladyship if we was to ask you to come down-stairs?"

She had sprung up nervously at his first words. She rushed now before him down-stairs—unable to reply, unable to question—as light as a girl of twenty, though three times that age; followed trembling by the other, who was not half so old, nor half so full of life as she.

CHAPTER II.

BEFORE I can fully explain what happened next, and what Lady Eskside saw when she rushed down-stairs, I am obliged to turn back for some hours to the afternoon of this day, and for some miles, to a scene of a very different kind—a scene so opposed to the other in all its circumstances, that it is strange to realise the close connection between them; though the two were so closely linked together as to be incomprehensible, one without the other. The village of Lasswade lies on the Esk, at a lower elevation, and nearer to the sea, than Rossraig House. It was, at the time I speak of, a much more primitive village than it is now, when so many cottages of gentility have sprung up around as to make it almost a suburb of Edinburgh. It consisted of little more than one street, which straggled off into the country at one end, and at the other dragged itself across the bridge to conclude in a humble postscript of an additional street on the other side of the water. The Esk, which ran through it, was not beautiful at this point. It was somewhat dirty, and encumbered with the overflowings of the village; but yet the groups of clustered houses on either side of the river, framed in by the high wooded banks which you could see rising in the distance on either hand as you stood on the bridge, and with the fresh green fringe of rich and silent country beyond, was a pretty sight. There was no railway near at that time, but a coach ran regularly on all lawful days, from the corner of Princes Street to the Bull Inn in the High Street, and conveyed its few passengers with a regu-

larity and steadiness quite satisfactory to those leisurely people. But the aspect of Lasswade, though considered cheerful and inviting by its Edinburgh visitors, was very dreary on this March afternoon, when the wind blew a hurricane, and the rain now and then came down in torrents. Between these storm-showers there came "blinks" of intermission, when people who loved to see what was going on came forth to their doors, after the fashion of the place; and it was this humble sprinkling of the population which, as many of them remembered later, witnessed the passage through the town of a still humbler visitor, a poor woman who arrived shortly before the darkening in a miserable condition enough. Two small boys accompanied her, wet through, splashed with mud, and crying with weariness, and with the buffets of the wind which blew them off their little legs. The woman was tall, wrapt in an old shawl of that indescribable no-colour of which the vagrant class has a monopoly. Her damp clothes hung limp about her, her poor bonnet, wet and limp like her dress, clung to the dark locks which here and there escaped from its cover. She was a stranger, as her weary and bewildered looks testified, and the children who clung to her on either side seemed to confuse her still more by their whimpering weariness. This melancholy little group came over the bridge in one of the pauses of the storm, when a few people had strayed out to their doors to relieve the *ennui* of the wet and stormy day by a little gossip at least. Chief among these were Merran Miller, the blacksmith's wife, a woman too fond of hearing everything that was going on (people said) for the comfort of her house; and the old postman, Simon Simson, whose work was over for the day. When the stranger approached this knot of gossips, and asked the way to Jean Macfarlane's inn, they all answered at once, glad of an event, with directions on the one hand and remonstrances on the other. Old Simon pointed out the way with officious haste; but Mrs Miller stopped the wayfarer to tender advice.

"My woman," she said, "I would not go to Jean Macfarlane's if I were you. You're wet and cauld, but a wee piece further would make little difference. John Todd at the Loanhead is real respectable, and would give lodgings just as cheap."

"Hoots, woman! Jean Macfarlane will do her nae harm," cried old Simon, interrupted in the midst of his instructions.

"It's no a house for an honest woman," said the smith's wife, "or for little bairns, poor things. They maun have travelled far the day to be so wet and so draiglet. Bide a moment and I'll give them a piece."

"Where did you say it was?" said the stranger, vacantly, paying no regard to this benevolent offer; and she went on with her children, following the old man's directions, without waiting for Mrs Miller's return with the "piece" which she had gone into her house to seek. This of itself was a strange thing to happen with any one so poor and miserable, and impressed the fact of her appearance upon the mind of the smith's wife, mortified by such a tacit refusal of her kindness. "She maun be a foreigner—or a fool," said Merran, standing with the rejected piece in her hand, and watching the retreating figures as they approached Jean Macfarlane's door.

Jean Macfarlane's house was worse spoken of than any other house in Lasswade. Every disturbance that happened in the tranquil place came from that centre of disorder and lawlessness; and to lodge there, or to propose lodging there, was of itself a tacit acknowledgment of vagrancy, or at least of an absence of that regard for other people's opinions which is the first step towards respectability. All the disreputable class of travellers who passed through so quiet a place found their way to it by instinct, and recommended others of their own kind. No one was too low for Jean Macfarlane. Pedlars of the lowest class, travelling tinkers, tramps without even that pretence at occupation, frequented her house. She was herself the most dreaded personage in the village: a large, coarsely-handsome woman, loud-voiced and hot-tempered, the most terrible scold and "randy" on all Eskside. The minister, who had once attempted, simple soul, to bring her to reason, had been made to flee before her; and the chief elder of the parish, Mr Mouter himself, was known to be in the habit of walking a mile round rather than pass her door,—a proceeding at which many people scoffed, asking, What was religion if it preserved you so little from the fear of man, or indeed of woman? It may be supposed, then, that the poor woman who openly asked to be directed to Jean Macfarlane's was as poor and as completely beyond all regard for the prejudices of society as it was possible to be. She went on without pause or hesitation, with an abstracted indifference of demeanour which perhaps was occa-

sioned by mere weariness and discomfort, to the little tavern. The aspect of the house was not encouraging, neither was the reception which the traveller received. It was the last house in the village, dreary always, drearier than ever on this stormy afternoon. In the poor little parlour with its sanded floor, which was the better part of the establishment, two men, in wet coats, steaming from the rain, sat before the fire, talking loudly over their little measure of whisky, while Jean's voice rang through the house as she went and came, in a continuous and generally angry monologue. The newcomer came up to her timidly, holding back the children, and asked in a low tone for a room with a fire, where she and her children could rest. "A room to yoursel'!" said the mistress of the house; "set you up! are you better than other folk, that ye canna share and share alike? Sirs, this leddy's mista'en her road. She thinks she's at the Bull, where there's plenty o' parlours and private rooms, and naebody tae gang near them. Here's a' the private room you'll get in my house. Eh, woman, canna ye stop the mouth o' that girning brat? It's cauld and weet? I can see that: but it needna deave decent folk. Sit aff from the fire and let the woman in, ye twa drucken brutes o' men! What do you want there, dribbling and drinking, and spending your wives' siller? Let the puir bit things get near the fire——"

"Jean, you're the greatest randy in the parish!" said one of the men, getting up in time to save himself from the ignominious push aside which sent his companion, reeling, out of the way.

"And if I'm a randy, what are ye? drucken beasts that drink a' night and sit owre the fire a' day? Ca' yourselves men!" cried Jean, with the freedom of perfect independence. "You can sit down here, wife, if this will do ye. Eh, what a handless thing that canna warm her wean's feet, nor even gie't a clat on the side o' the head to make it haud its tongue! Ye're a' alike, a' alike. Tea? Lord preserve us! what does the woman want wi' tea? A wee drap whisky would do ye ten times the good. Will I gie ye what ye want? Oh ay, now you've gotten to your English I'll gie ye what ye want—if ye'll make thae little deevils stop their clatter, and no look sic a draiglet idiot yoursel'."

The men laughed uneasily, not knowing whether they might not divert the stream of Jean's eloquence upon them-

selves, as she thus rated her other guest ; but all took the despotism as a matter of course, and submitted meekly, without anything of the surprise or indignation with which the lodgers of a different kind of hostelry would have regarded such an address. They were her customers, it is true, but at the same time they were her subjects. The new-comer scarcely, indeed, seemed to hear the abuse directed against her. She drew her little boys to the fire, took one on her knee and put her arm round the other, drying their little wet hands and faces with a corner of her shawl. They were subdued into quiet and comfort by the time that Mrs Macfarlane's servant-lass, Jess, brought them their tea, on a battered old iron tray, with coarse brown sugar, and a jug of skim-milk flanking the broken and smoky teapot. People in this poor woman's condition of life are not fastidious, and the miserable beverage warmed and comforted the humble travellers. After some time and much further parley with Jess—who was less peremptory and despotic than her mistress, though she, too, felt herself the superior of so poor a guest—the woman and her children were allowed to go up-stairs into a dingy little bedroom,—a poor exchange for the fireside which, grimy as it was, had the comfort of warmth. Dear reader, your children or mine would (in our apprehensions at least) have died of such treatment ; but the tramp-mother is saved from anxieties which trouble mothers in other circumstances. She did all she could for them, and which of us can do more ? She had no dry clothes to put on them, but she was not afraid of taking cold. She put them both on the bed, where they soon fell asleep, and covered them with a blanket ;—they were damp but warm, and rest was heavenly to their poor little wearied limbs. They were asleep as soon as their little heads touched the pillow ; and then she sat down by the bedside--to think.

How many processes get called by that name which have little enough to do with thought ! The mother of these children had lived up to this time an almost entirely physical existence—if it is possible to say this of one who had gone through passions and miseries, and acted upon impulses which had to do with the more ethereal part of her being. She had been moved to despair, which is (I humbly suppose, not knowing) a sensation beyond the reach of any animal, save man ; but never in all her life had she been moved be-

fore by a tremendous moral impulse, against her own will, and in contradiction to all that she believed to be for her own good and happiness. At other times she had eased the pain in her breast by sudden resolutions, sudden actions, all more or less like the instincts of an animal, to get rid of some burden or trouble which oppressed her. But somehow, she could not tell how, an entirely new tide had set in, mysterious and unaccountable, in her being. She had been driven by an impulse which she hated, which she resisted, which made her miserable, to do a certain act which her wild and uninstructed mind took to be justice. Long she had struggled against it, but gradually it had grown until it became too much for her, and had driven her at last to the verge of an act which would make her miserable, yet would be *right*. What a wonderful moral revolution had been worked in a creature so untaught as to seem without any moral nature at all, before things came to this pass, I need not say. And now she sat down, as she thought—to think; not to think whether she would do it, but—which it was to be? Her mind was wildly made up, after many a conflict, to submit to the wild law of justice which had seized upon her against her will. She was about to give up, to “them that had the right to it,” one of her children. What she had to decide now was—which was it to be?

I do not believe that a woman ever sullied by vice would have been capable of the moral impression to which this woman had been made subject. I think that the natural consciousness (rather than conscience) of the vicious, coincides curiously with common law in this respect,—giving, with a bitterness of natural scorn, upon which conventional interpretations throw the aspect of a privilege and advantage, no fatherhood to the vicious man, and but one parent to the child of shame. Purity alone recognises the right on both sides; though law stops short with insolent opposition to nature, and robs the virtuous woman as it robs, justly, the vicious man. How long it was before it dawned upon the woman of whom I speak, in the confusion of her uninstructed thoughts, in the bewildered silence of her ignorant soul, that she had robbed the father of her children in taking both of them, I cannot tell; nor how long in her absolute solitude, with no one to counsel or even to understand what was in her mind, she fought against the idea; but at last it had become too strong for her. To my thinking there could

be no such unanswerable argument to prove that she had remained an uncontaminated wife ; and now the long-debated question had come to its hardest point, its most limited compass—which was she to give and which to keep, of the two who were all in all to her ? Which was she to give away ?

Poor soul ! she had done much that was very foolish, and much that was wrong (but that because she knew no better) in her life. She had been a trouble to many better people than herself. She had spoiled one other existence as well as her own, and thrown a cloud upon several lives—all without knowing much what she was doing,—without meaning it—out of ignorance. Now here she sat, absolute arbitress of two lives more, able to determine their course almost as she pleased, yet as ignorant as ever—as little aware of the real character of her responsibility. If ever woman merited pity, this poor woman did—not only to give up one of her children, but to choose which to give up. Her brain, so dull, yet so keen as it was, became, as it were, suffused with a mist of pain ; her head grew giddy, a film came before her eyes ; a sense of the intolerable overwhelmed her—that terrible sensation which makes your very being reel like a drunken thing, the sense that you cannot bear that which you know you must bear, whatever happens. She put down her throbbing head into her hands. To keep silent for that terrible moment—not to cry out and writhe, as this sword went through her heart, was all that she could do.

She was a tall young woman, with a fine, elastic, well-developed figure, looking about thirty, but not so old. Her features were very fine and regular : her great, restless, unquiet, dark eyes flashed out of deep caverns, which seemed to have been hollowed out by pain or passion rather than by time. Any delicacy of complexion or youthful bloom which she had ever possessed must have been long gone, for her skin was burned to one uniform tint of reddish brown—the colour of exposure, of health and vigour, but of that vigour and health which are purchased by all the severities of an outdoor life. No one could see her once without looking again, without wondering over so much beauty accompanied by so little attractiveness. She had vagrant written in every line of her fine form and miserable dress ; but notwithstanding there was that in her abstract look, always busy with something else than the thing immediately before her—in

a certain careless calm of manner, and indifference to all surrounding her, which, I think, would have made the most abandoned of men hesitate ere he offered any rudeness to this strange vagrant. She had a wedding-ring on her finger—that was no great matter, for it is easy to show to the world that ensign of respectability ; but there was something more trustworthy in her look and presence, the passionless abstraction of her air. In her rough dress, with her outdoor look, her hard hands, her strange beauty scarcely on the wane, she was protected from every shadow of insult by the stony purity of her looks. Such a woman might be miserable enough, but wanton never.

There were dreary red curtains half drawn over the window, and the dingy blind was partially drawn down, leaving little light in the miserable room, even had the sky been bright ; and it was now darkening towards night. It was the physical cold, I think—that discomfort which always makes itself doubly felt when the mind is weighed down with trouble—which roused her to the sense that what she had to do must be done quickly. She rose up and wandered, tottering, round and round the bed—first to one side, then to the other, asking herself that heartrending question, Which ? The children lay there in the pretty grace of childish *abandon*. One little fellow had kicked off unawares his muddy boot, which fell to the ground, and startled her so that she put her hands to her panting side, and did not recover the shock for some moments. He was the fair child of the two, and lay like a little white angel with his dimpled hands stretched above his head in the perfect grace of infant sleep. The other was almost as dark as his brother was fair ; his black curly locks were ruffled up from his bold forehead, his little arms folded on his breast, his rose-mouth shut close with unconscious resoluteness—though it might be but the mother's sick fancy which saw this expression on the little face. They were beautiful children both, with a general resemblance to each other ; yet very unlike,—one so blond, and the other so dark, one so delicately gentle in his aspect, the other bold and handsome like a little gipsy prince. Poor soul ! what words can I use to describe the agony of choice with which this unhappy woman hung over them ? But she made no choice at all—how could she ? Suddenly, in passionate quick decision of her fate and his, she snatched the dark child into her arms

—not because she loved him least, nor because he was the eldest, nor for any other reasonable motive under heaven. Only because the other, God help her! had kicked off his boot upon the floor. In such a terrible choice, what but the most fantastic chance, the wildest hazard, can tell upon a mind distraught? She caught him up to her, with anxious care not to wake him, which contrasted strangely with the passion and misery in her face. Once having done it, nature itself demanded that no moment should be lost. She gathered him closely into her arms, wrapped her shawl round him, and leaving the other on the bed, went swiftly and silently down the dark stairs, and out into the night.

If any one had spoken to her or touched her, I believe the poor distracted creature would have gone mad or fallen into dead unconsciousness; for nature was strained in her almost to the furthest limit; but no one saw or interfered, or knew what was being done. She never looked at the boy again, but held him fast and hurried on. He was a child of seven years old, but small and light; in her vigorous arms —she was as strong as a man, as light and rapid as a savage —he was as a feather's weight. She went away with him unnoticed, wrapping her poor shawl round him to keep him from the rain, through the muddy roads, in the storm and dusky twilight. Merran Miller, the smith's wife, shutting her door in the darkening, when the rain began to blow in, saw the dark figure pass, and said to herself that Jean Macfarlane had sent the beggar-wife away; and oh! what a night it was to travel in, even for the like of her! "But what's come o' the bairns?" she asked herself; then shut the door, and went in, and stirred her fire, and put on her kettle. The beggar-wife and her bairns were no concern of hers.

"The beggar-wife" went swiftly up by dark Eskside beneath the trees, that waved overhead like spirits in pain. She was blinded with the rain, not with tears, for her eyes were dry and refused to shed more. Her limbs trembled under her, but her wild heart and purpose did not fail. After a time she came back again alone, without her burden. The dark branches still tossed against the pale sky, and kept on their passionate struggle against the elements; but the forlorn human creature who tottered along underneath, swift but unsteady, beaten about by the wind, drenched by the rain, too miserable to feel either, had lost

all sense of struggle. The lassitude of soul which comes after a great act accomplished was in her. She went like a ghost across the bridge, where no one now was visible, so much had the storm increased, and up the further end of the village street. Jean Macfarlane was sitting with her guests in the little room down-stairs, drinking with them, and filling the air with her loud excited voice and torrent of words. There was no one in the passage or stair to note the dark figure gliding back to the room which no one had cared to notice since she entered it. It was dark, but she required no light. The other child, he who remained, her only one, lay still as she had left him. She put down her face upon his warm flushed cheek ; she lifted him tenderly on her lap, and put on his little boot, and soothed him when he woke and cried in the dark, and clung to her. "Mother's here ! —mother's here !" she murmured, crooning to him, poor wretched hopeless soul ! with the voice of a dove in her nest. Then she took him too in her arms, and going down-stairs stopped the dirty maid who was Jean Macfarlane's whole staff of service, and paid for the poor refreshment she had had. "You're no going on sic a night ?" said the girl ; "and whaur's the other wee laddie ?" "He has gone on before," said the mother. "We are going to meet the coach at Loanhead." "Then you'll have to be awfu' quick," cried the girl, compassionate. "Poor wee man ! what a night to be out in ! Here's a piece to give them when you're in the coach ; but oh, woman, tak' pity on the bairns, and bide till the morn. It's enough to give them their death."

"I cannot stay—good night," cried the stranger, passing out. The good-natured lass, though she was dirty, looked after her, shaking an unkempt head, and twisting up as she did so an elf-lock which had fallen out of the poor hold of her deficient hair-pins. "Eh, thae tramps, what an awfu' life !" Jess said to herself, comparing her own position with that of the wanderer, with a thrill of superior comfort and well-being. She paused to fasten up the refractory lock before she followed to the door to look out after the departing guest ; but by that time the darkness had swallowed her up, and nothing was visible except the wild sweeping rain, which came down in a sheet, visible across the blackness of the night, like the warp of a sable web. "Lord save us ! sic a night to be out in ! and oh thae puir weans !" cried Jess, with a grimy tear in the corner of her eye.

The stranger and her child got into the coach at Loanhead, but they did not reach Edinburgh in that respectable conveyance. Somewhere in the outskirts of the town they managed to drop out of the coach, leaving the money for their fare on the damp seat, which their wet clothes had soaked. "A queer customer yon, but an awfu' honest woman!" the coachman said, with mingled wonder and admiration. It was still scarcely night, though so much had happened since it began to grow dark. The vagrant found her way to some haunt of vagrants such as I do not know, and have no chance of being able to describe, and there passed the night safe from all search or possibility of pursuit, encompassed by securities and precautions which can only be made perfect by a class at war with society. She herself had done no crime so far as any one knew; but the instinctive suspicion of a race accustomed to shelter from the eye of justice kept her safe. Notwithstanding the hue and cry that was raised after her, she went on her way as secure as any woman could be, and got back to England with her boy, and disappeared among the mysterious fastnesses of her class, not to reappear or be heard of for years. Poor soul! she had left no traces behind her by which she could be recognised. Even in Jean Macfarlane's house the instinct of caste was roused to cover her retreat. "A woman with a wean? Am I to remark a' the women with weans that come and gang afore my door—there's ower mony o' them, far ower mony! I've something better to do than to glowr at women," cried the mistress of the place. "There was but ane here—a real decent person, with twa bairns. She took them baith away with her, safe and sound, and got the coach at Loanhead," said Jess. "What like was she? How am I to tell that never saw her but in her bannet? A' that I can tell you was that she sighed sair, mair like a moan than a sigh. She was a real decent woman," cried good-hearted Jess. And this was all her history and description—all by which she could be identified among others. The prolonged investigations that were made disclosed nothing more.

CHAPTER III.

THE hall at Rossraig was large and long : there was a great fireplace in it, from which came a feeble gleam of firelight. A large lamp, swinging from the raftered roof, threw but a moderate light into its great height and space ; but upon a side-table a candle was flaring, its long waving flame blown about by the movement in the air, which had not yet subsided after the opening of the door. A group of servants who had been crowding round some unseen object in the corner dispersed hastily as Lady Eskside was seen descending the stair, but only to hang about behind-backs waiting the interpretation of the mystery. One person only, an old and confidential servant, kept her place near the door, round which there was a wide stain of wet made by the rain, which had burst in when it was opened. Lady Eskside went forward bewildered, not perceiving what it was she had been called to see ; and it was not till a sick disappointment had begun to creep over her that the old lady found out the central object on which all eyes were turned. On the great skin mat which lay between the door and the wall stood something so small and dark as to be almost undistinguishable, till the light caught a glimmer and sparkle from a pair of eyes low down, gleaming out of a little pale and scared face. Lady Eskside went slowly forward, bracing herself for something, she knew not what. When she caught the gleam of those eyes, she stood still and uttered a sudden cry.

A child stood there, with its feet buried in the long skin of the mat, backing closely into the corner for support, half frightened, half defiant. Tears were standing in those great eyes, and hanging on the pale little cheek—the lip was ready to quiver at a moment's notice ; but still he confronted the novel world in which he found himself with a certain defiance. The old lady, who felt all her dreams and hopes suddenly realised at the first glance, went nearer to him, with tremulous excitement, and stooped down over the child. Her whole frame was trembling—a mist obscured her eyes. “Who are you ?—who are you ?” she cried. “Oh, who are you ?” then stopping short as the frightened look got the mastery on the child's face, and his lip began to quiver, she changed her tone with a wonderful effort, and dropped down

upon her knees on the mat to bring herself on a level with him. Lady Eskside saw in the little face more than any one else could see, and knew him, as she said afterwards, at once. "My bonny man!" she cried, "my poor little man, nobody will hurt you. What is your name, and who brought you here? You are safe—quite safe—and nobody will harm you. Who are you, and who brought you here?"

The child made a pause—he was struggling proudly against his inclination to cry; and there was breathless silence in the hall as if some great revelation had been about to be made. Then a small whimpering voice, with tears in it, made itself audible, "I am—Val," it said.

Lady Eskside rose up as if by some force which she could not resist. She turned upon Mary Percival, and the group of servants beyond, with uplifted hands, calling their attention imperatively, though for the moment she could not speak. Then her voice broke forth, choked and hoarse, "Val! Mary, you hear, you hear! Did not I know it? Val! Oh, at last, at last!"

Then in a moment she stilled herself, and knelt down trembling upon the mat. "My bonnie little man!" she said, her voice trembling, "tell me again. Val—Val what? And, oh, who brought you here?"

"Nobody don't call me nothing but Val," said the child. "Mammy brought me. Not for no harm. She's gone back for Dick."

"Ah!" Lady Eskside's breath seemed to stop. She put out one hand behind her, and plucked blindly at Mary Percival's dress, to call her close attention. "Your mammy has gone back—for—Dick?"

"He's down at the village," said the child, keeping his eyes fixed upon her with the watchfulness of terror. "He's asleep. I've got to wait for mammy. She put me in out of the rain. I'll be good till mammy comes. Oh, don't let him touch me! I ain't come for no harm."

Harding the butler had approached nearer, anxious to bring his superior cleverness to his mistress's aid; and it was this movement which made the little fellow back further into his corner, holding up one small arm before his face as if to ward off a blow. A precocious knowledge of danger and a precocious desperation of baby courage glimmered in his frightened but excited eyes. "I won't touch nobody if you'll let me alone!" he cried.

"Stand back, Harding," said Lady Eskside ; and then she laid her soft old hand upon the child's raised arm, which yielded to her touch. "Nobody will harm you here, my poor little bonnie man. Oh, look at him ! look at him, Mary ! Is it my old een that deceive me ? Is it from having always one idea in my head ? But you are not half-crazy like me. Mary, try to forget the name and everything else. Look at his face ! "

Mary Percival stood close behind, as much moved in her way, though with feelings very different from those of her old friend. Instead of the love and yearning in Lady Eskside's heart, there was something which felt like half-hatred —a repugnance for which she detested herself—in the intense interest with which she had watched every look and movement of the little alien creature. Her voice was low and choked as she replied, as if the words were extracted from her, "I am looking at him. He is dark—not fair—like—his father. He has different eyes. Oh, Lady Eskside, what can I say ? Everything else is Richard—everything ; and I don't wish to think so like you."

I do not believe that Lady Eskside heard these last words, which were foreign to the passionate tenderness and joy in her own mind. She heard only so much as chimed in with her own thoughts. "Mary sees it too," she said, with a low outcry of such emotion as cannot be put into words. She was still on her knees in the attitude of prayer. With one hand she held the child fast, and with the other she covered her face. Some low sounds, but they were not audible words, came from her as she knelt—sounds which no one around heard distinctly, yet all understood by the strange sentiment of mingled anguish and rapture there was in them. Then she rose up, shaken and agitated, yet all her vigorous self.

"Harding," she said, "you'll stay here and watch—till—she comes back. For God's sake take care what you do. You must not scare her, or send her away ; or go out yourself down the avenue, and let your wife stay here. It's a matter of life and death. Marg'ret, you hear all I say." This was to the housekeeper, Harding's wife. "Keep the house quiet ; no noise, no excitement ; but watch and be ready. Let one of the women prepare the green room, and light fires ; and Joseph can bring me wine, and some milk for the children. Oh, thank God that I can say such a word ! You'll show—her—every respect. Marg'ret, Marg'ret, you know what I mean ? "

"Oh, yes, my lady—yes ! I see it a'," cried the house-keeper ; "but it will be too much for you."

"Joy's never hard to bear," said Lady Eskside, with a smile. "My bonnie boy ! come with me—you are not afraid of me ?"

The child looked at her with his great eyes, which fright and novelty and the paleness of his little face made twice their usual size. "Richard never had eyes like these," Miss Percival said to herself ; but it would have been cruel, indeed, to have said this aloud. He paused a moment irresolute, and then gave a wild glance at the door, as if the impulse of flight was the strongest ; then he put his little cold hand, half-reluctantly, into the soft white hand held out for it. The old lady looked round upon them all with a glow of triumph indescribable ; how her hand closed upon those little tremulous fingers ! She marched to the door of the dining-room, which was nearest, her whole figure expanding like some Roman woman in a victor's procession. What battle had she won ? what enemy had she conquered ? Mary, full of strange agitation, followed her, wondering, tremulous, excited, but always with a certain repugnance, into the warm room, all ruddy and cheerful with light from the fire.

And then a sudden change, strange to be seen, came upon this old Volumnia, this heroic matron in her triumph. She sat down by the fire, in the great chair where her old lord had been sitting over his wine half an hour before, and gathered up the child into her lap, and turned at once as by the touch of a wand into the old mother, the mere woman, all whose instincts culminated in simple maternity. Perhaps her delicate old hands had never touched anything so muddy and rough before ; but she was totally unconscious of this as she set the shivering wet little figure upon her satin lap, and began to unlace and draw off his wet boots. Lady Eskside was a proud woman, fastidious in everything she approached or handled ; but she undid the muddy leather laces, and pulled off the dirty little boots, and stained her worn and fine old hands, so delicately white and dainty, without hesitation, even without a thought. She held the child close to her, murmuring over him unconscious sounds of endearment, like a dove in her nest. "My little man ! my bonnie little man !—put out your poor wee feetie to the fire—how cold they are, the poor wee pilgrim feet—and how far they've wandered ! but this is home, my darling, this is

home!—And so they call you Val!—Oh, my bonnie boy, to be out in such a night,—they call you Val? and your brother is Dick—oh, may God keep my heart that I may not die of joy!"

The child sat on her knee with all the gravity of his age, and heard everything, but made no response. I think the weariness and the unusual comfort began alike to tell upon him; the cheerful light dazzled his eyes, the warmth crept into his baby limbs, and even the excitement and strange novelty of his position were not enough at seven years old to counteract these subduing influences. By-and-by his little eyes began to wink as he gazed into the fire and felt the drowsy spell of the genial warmth. When Joseph brought the tray, he took the piece of cake which was put into his hand, and ate it slowly, gazing and winking at the fire. Then his head began to droop against Lady Eskside's breast. With an effort he opened his eyes at intervals, fixing them severely as if they could never close again, upon the fire, then gradually subdued by the warmth shut them altogether, and half turning towards her, nestled his head upon the old lady's shoulder. As his curls fell finally into this resting place, Lady Eskside turned to Mary with an unspeakable look: "He knows them that belong to him," she said in a whisper. Her arms encircled him with that delight of protecting maternity which goes through all the levels of creation. It was but the hen gathering her chickens under her wing—yet God himself can find no tenderer simile. All expression, save that last supreme beatitude which borders upon vacuity, went out of her face. She forgot everything around her—the past, the future, her duties of the present. Everything in the world had become suddenly concentrated to her in this action, which was no more elevated than that of a bird in her nest, this watch which secured warmth, slumber, and safety to the child.

Miss Percival sat on the other side of the great dining-table and gazed at her old friend with that mixture of irritation, wonder, and reluctant sympathy which provokes and tantalises a friendly soul when watching some novel exhibition of human weakness. She could not understand Lady Eskside's instant adoption into her very heart of the strange little unknown creature, dropped from the skies or by the winds, unseen and unknown until this moment, and which might be a little demon in human form for aught that any

one knew. And yet she did understand in a way which made her irritation rather greater than less. Mary was not very clever, not very remarkable in any way ; but she was herself—thinking and feeling according to her own nature and principles, and not according to any conventional model. She did not possess that sugary sweetness of disposition, or those very ethereal Christian sentiments which put aside all personal consciousness of wrong and seem to prefer injury. Richard Ross had been, if not her lover, at least so indicated by every family prepossession, so prepared by training and association to be her eventual husband, that his sudden and strange marriage had given a shock to her nerves and moral nature from which she had never recovered. I cannot tell if she had ever been what people call “in love” with him. If she had, her love had never taken full shape and form, but had lingered insidiously about her heart, prepared, by every indication of her young life, and every probability of the future, to come into being at a touch. This touch was given in another way when Richard disappeared into the nameless obscurity and shame that surrounded his marriage. Her whole being received the shock, and received it without warning or preparation. It changed the aspect of all mankind to her, more perhaps than it changed her feeling towards Richard. He it was who had inflicted the wound, but its effects were not confined to him. She was the gentlest creature in existence, but her pride was roused against the whole world, in which outward appearances seem ever to gain the day, and the still and unpretending are held of no account.

Instead, however, of making the more (after these reflections) of the simple beauty she possessed, which was of a very attractive kind, though moderate in degree, or taking the good of her real advantages, Mary had done what many proud gentlewomen do—she had retired doubly into herself after the shock she received. She had withdrawn from society, and society, heedless, had gone on its way and paid little attention to the withdrawal : so that the penalties fell not at all upon it, but upon herself. She was still young, between six and seven and twenty ; but something of the aspect which that same mocking and careless world calls that of an old maid, was stealing imperceptibly upon her. Her pride, though so natural, thus told doubly against her—for people who were incapable of understanding the shock she had received, or the revulsion of her proud and delicate

heart, called her, with light laughter, a disappointed woman, foiled in her attempt to secure a husband. Many of us who ought to know much better use such words in thoughtless levity every day. I need not enter into the circumstances which, on this night of all others, had brought Mary to Rosscraig, and recalled to her mind, through Lady Eskside's story, many sharp and painful memories which she had partially succeeded in banishing from her thoughts. I do not think that this rush of recollection had the effect of moving her to any enthusiasm for Richard's child. The strange bitterness of scorn with which she learned what kind of woman that was who had been preferred to herself, moved not the best part of her nature ; for Mary, as I have said, was not sweetness and gentleness personified, but a genuine human creature, not all good. Perhaps the very strength of her antagonistic feelings, and the absence of any general maudlin sympathy with everything pitiful presented to her, made her all the more certain that the child was Richard's child, the child of the tramp whom Richard had admired and loved more than herself ; an interest which was half repugnance attracted her eyes and her thoughts to this little creature, who was assuredly no stranger, no impostor, but the very flesh and blood which might have been her own. Yes, he might have been her child—and the blood ran tingling with shame, anger, pride, and dislike to Mary's very finger-tips, as this thought flashed through her mind. She sat and watched him, falling asleep on Lady Eskside's knee, with the strangest aching mixture of irritation and interest. She was half envious, half impatient of the strange beatitude and absorption with which her old friend held the boy, throwing her own very being into him—the child who had been stolen away from all lawful life and protection, who had lived among outcasts, a beggar, a baby-adventurer, the child of a tramp ! How could that proud old woman take him out of hands so stained, and take him to her pure and honourable breast ? Poor Mary was not quite responsible for the hot anger, the unjust condemnation of this thought ; these angry feelings surged uppermost, as the worst of us always does, to the surface of her agitated soul.

The lamp had been placed in a corner, so as not to disturb the child's sleep, and the room formed a dark background to that group, which was relieved against the dusky glow of the fire. Silence was in the house, sometimes

interrupted by a stealthy suggestive creaking of the great door, as Mrs Harding from time to time looked out into the night. The winds still raged without, and the rain swept against the window, filling the air with a continuous sound. Soon that stealthy noise outside, which betrayed the watchers who were on the outlook for the mother's return with the other child, affected Mary with a sympathetic suspense. Her imagination rushed out to meet the stranger, to realise her appearance. Richard's wife! She could not sit still and think of this new figure on the scene. If the woman came Mary felt that she must withdraw; she would not meet her—she could not! and this feeling made her eagerly anxious for the appearance of the stranger who excited such wild yet causeless antagonism in her own mind. She went to the window, and drew aside the curtain and gazed out—that she might see her approach, she said to herself, and escape out of the way.

Thus time went on; Lady Eskside, worn out with emotion, and hushed by happiness, dozed too, I think, in the easy-chair with the sleeping child on her lap, while Miss Percival stood, with every sense awake, watching the dark avenue through the window. And I do not know how long it was before, all at once, another conviction took possession of Mary—which was the true one—that Richard's wife had no intention of coming back. This thought came to her in a moment, as if some one had said it in her ear. Had some one said it? Was it a mysterious communication made to her somehow, from one soul to another through the darkness of that night which hid the speaker, which had fallen upon the child's mother like a veil? Miss Percival sank, almost fell, down upon the chair, on which she had been kneeling in her eagerness to look out. She was startled and shaken, yet calmed, with sensations incomprehensible to her. She sat still and listened, but without any further expectation. A strange dim realisation of the unknown creature of whom she had been thinking hard thoughts came into her mind. Was she too, then, an independent being, with a heart which could be wrung, and a mind capable of suffering?—not merely Mary's rival, Mary's antagonist, a type of lower nature and coarser impulse. The wind abated, the rain cleared off, the silent minutes crept on, but no one came to the house where all except the old lord were listening and watching. Mary, roused at length, stirred up in all her own

energies by this conviction, felt that doubt was no longer possible. The unknown mother had given this remorseful tribute to the house she had despoiled, but had kept her share and would appear no more.

"Dear Lady Eskside," she said, laying her hand on her old friend's shoulder, "don't you think it would be better to let Mrs Harding put him to bed?"

"Eh? Is it you, Mary? What were you saying? I do not feel sure," said Lady Eskside, looking up with a smile, "that I was not dozing myself upon the bairn's head. Put him to his bed? it would perhaps be the best thing, as you say; but I cannot give him over to Harding, I will carry him up-stairs myself."

"Rather give him to me," said Mary; "he is too heavy for you. I will take him to the old nursery——"

"Where his father and you have played many a day," said Lady Eskside, with a smile which was weak with happiness. "Oh, my dear, my dear! but how different our thoughts were then!" Here she saw a contraction upon Mary's face which gave her a note of warning. "Call the women, Mary," she added, hurriedly. "I have lost count of time. *She* should have been here by now with the other one. Oh! but I can never love him like this one, that has slept on my bosom like a child of my own, and crept into my heart."

"She has not come. She does not mean to come," said Mary; but she spoke low, and Lady Eskside did not mark what she said. Her own mind was filled to overflowing with her new possession, and no real anxiety about the other one or about the mother existed for the moment in her mind. "Jean, take this darling in your arms—softly, softly," she said to the maid. "You are a strong, good girl, and you will carry him kindly. Don't waken my bonnie boy. I'll go with you up-stairs and see him put to bed."

And, absorbed in this new occupation, she hurried up-stairs after Jean, giving a hundred warnings—to lay his head comfortably—to hold him faster—to throw her apron about his little feet—like a foolish old mother, half beside herself with love and happiness. She could think of nothing but the lost treasure restored; and I might spend pages on the description before I could tell you with what renewal of all old and dead joys she watched the maid's anxious but vain attempts to prepare the child for bed without awaking him,

and to soothe him when he stirred and pushed them away with his rosy feet, and murmured whimpering childish objections to everything that was being done for him. In this unlooked-for fulness of joy, she forgot everything else in the world.

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CHAPTER IV.

LORD ESKSIDE was a homely representative of Scotch aristocracy. He was as proud as Lucifer in his own way, but that way was quaint and unsuspected by strangers; and his outward appearance and manners, and the principles he professed, were even humorously homely and almost democratical. Pretension of any kind moved him to an exaggeration of this natural homeliness; though when his dignity was really touched nobody could be more decided in his treatment of the vulgar, whom on ordinary occasions he seemed to incline towards, and to whom, so long as they made no fictitious claims to importance, he was whimsically friendly and indulgent. He had many other paradoxical sentiments about him. Being a high Tory by tradition and birth, it happened to him now and then to take up a trenchant Radical theory, which he clung to with the obstinacy of his race, and would carry out in the most uncompromising manner. He was keenly intelligent when he chose; but when he did not choose, no lout in the village could be more thickheaded than the old lord, nor show greater need to have everything "summered and wintered" to him, as Lady Eskside often impatiently said. He had strong feelings, but they lay very deep, and were seldom exhibited to the common eye, his own consciousness of their existence showing itself chiefly in a testy determination to avoid all means of moving them, which gave many ignorant persons the impression that our old lord was an ill-tempered man. He was impatient, I allow, and resented all long and slow explanations, except when it happened to be his caprice to put on the air of requiring them; and many people were afraid of his sharp retorts and ruthless questions. He was a little man, with keen hazel eyes gleaming out from

under overhanging eyebrows, which often gathered into seeming frowns ; not a man with whom, you may be sure, sentimental considerations would weigh much—or at least who would permit it to be seen how much they weighed.

He was very much startled when he heard what had happened—so much startled that he received the tale in comparative silence, half stupefied by the strange incident ; and allowed himself to be led by his wife to the side of the bed where the child slept profoundly, almost without a word of remark. He stood and gazed at it, his keen eyes twinkling from beneath their heavy eyebrows, and his under lip working, as it habitually did when he was moved by any feeling which he did not choose to show. But he uttered nothing more than an unintelligible “hump !” and instead of sympathising with Lady Eskside’s excitement, her tearful enthusiasm, and the tumult of agitation in which she was, turned away almost without response, and went off to his study, where he had been painfully busy with calculations and cogitations over the ‘Journal of Agriculture ;’ for he was a great farmer, and just then deeply occupied with the question of manures, a study of thrilling and delicate interest. He tried to resume these studies, but for this his philosophy did not suffice. He sat down, however, by his table as before, and with his periodical open before him—working his under lip, which projected slightly, and bending his brows—gave his mind to this new problem, which was more astounding than anything in agriculture. After a while he rose and rang the bell. It was answered by Harding, the English butler, who had been in Lord Eskside’s service for thirty years, and knew all about the family as an old servant knows—that is, rather more than there is to know. The fact, however, that Harding was English, gave a certain peculiarity to the connection between himself and his old master, who was equally ready to hold him up to admiration as “a good solid Englishman, not troubling himself about whimsies,” or to denounce him as “a doited English body, never understanding the one-half of what you said to him.” Lord Eskside had a mingled trust in Harding and contempt for him, which I do not think he could have entertained for a countryman of his own.

“Harding,” he said, “come in and shut the door. I suppose you know all that’s happened in the house to-night.

You should have called me. Haven't I always told you to call me when anything out of the way occurred?"

"My lord," said Harding, not without agitation, "there has never nothing happened much out of the way before. When I did call your lordship the night of the fire in the laundry, your lordship said I was a doited old fool—and how was I to know——?"

"That will do," said Lord Eskside; "you needn't recriminate. The thing I want to know is about this child. How did it come? who brought it? My lady has told me something, but I want your account. Now take your time, and begin at the beginning. Who brought the boy here?"

"My lord, if I were to die this moment," Harding began——

"Idiot! what would you die for this moment?" cried the old lord; "and if you did die, what information would I get from that? Begin at the beginning, I tell you: what happened? none of your adjurations. What do you *know*?"

"If your lordship will let me speak," said Harding, aggrieved. "I don't know from Adam who brought him. It was close upon dark, and the storm raging. I thought it was nothing but the wind that swept in, and a blast of rain that came full in my face. There hasn't been such a wind that I recollect since the year Mr Richard went first to college—when there was a hawful storm, as your lordship may remember——"

"Never mind the storm," said Lord Eskside, with an effort of patience, "think a little.—When did this occur. Fix upon the hour. Now—that's something definite. We'll get on from that."

"*That* there can be no doubt about, my lord," said Harding, promptly. "The bell was ringing for the servants' hall supper—which made it a little hard at first to hear the door-bell. We has our supper sharp at nine——"

("Trust him to mind his times of eating!" ejaculated Lord Eskside: "an Englishman never forgets that.")

——And just then the door-bell rang. Not expecting nobody, I was a little scared-like. I said to myself, 'Who's this a-coming at this time of the night?' and I called to Mrs 'Arding——"

"Lordsake, man, never mind your thoughts or your Mrs Hardings! get on."

"I called to Mrs 'Arding, my lord," said the butler,

solemnly, "to wait and see who it was afore they went into supper. It might have been visitors unexpected, as I've known to arrive all in an 'eap and never a room ready. It might have been Mr Richard, as is always particular. Beg your lordship's pardon, that was what passed through my 'ead. Then them as was outside rang again. I'm a bit confused with all that's 'appened. It was that loud that it sounded like the day of judgment——"

"There are to be no bells that ever I heard of at the day of judgment," said his master; "leave metaphors, man, and give me facts—that's all I want."

"Then they got to knocking on the door, my lord—not using the knocker like people as knows. I ain't superstitious, though I've heard tales enough to make your hair stand up on your head since I've been in the north—warnings and that sort. But I did say to myself, if so be it's for his lordship or my lady—spirits being in the family, so to speak—— Was it something else your lordship was pleased to want?"

"Send for your wife," growled Lord Eskside, who had rung the bell violently, and now stood impatient on the hearth with his back to the fire, working his projecting lip and shaggy eyebrows. This was so very common an interruption of the more important interviews between master and man, that Mrs Harding came without further call, not sorry of the opportunity of getting rid of a little of her own excitement, and very anxious to know, in a matter of so much moment, "what my lord would say."

"Look here," said her master. "What did he see? Not a word can I get out of him but havers. What did the man see? I suppose you were there too, like all the rest of the house—like everybody, in short, except myself. What did he see?"

"He saw naething, my lord, that I can make out," said the housekeeper; "just the door dung open in his face with the wind and a good push from the outside. It's been a wild night, and the sounds of the storm were awfu' confusing even to the like of me. So far as I can discover, there was just something thrownn inside, and a blast of weet, and the big door snatched out of his hand and clashed to, and all in a moment before he could say a word. That's a' that I can make out. I was in the servants' passage myself listening and wondering, and a' in a tremble with the

thoughts of visitors or waur. He didna say a word but gaed a kind of skreigh, and I kent something had happened. When I ran into the hall, and a' the women after me—for ye ken the story of the Eskside warning, my lord, as well as me—there was the wean standing up in the corner against the wa' ; and him there glow'ring at it, as if the bonnie bit laddie was a ghaist."

"And that's all ?"

"That's all, my lord, as far as I can find out—he says he saw a figure, but what kind of a figure—"

"It was a woman wrapped in a cloak," said Harding, somewhat sullenly—"I was coming to that ; a tall figure of a woman, not like nobody I know—a sort of a beggar—a tramp."

"Would you know her again, if you saw her ?" asked Lord Eskside.

"As for that, my lord—I see as she had black hair hanging down, and something red twisted round her neck,—a roughish sort of a woman. She caught hold of the door and shut it in my face," said Harding, roused to energy, "though she was the one as was outside and me in—"

"And said nothing—you are sure she said nothing ?"

"Not a word, my lord. I called out to her, Hollo ! 'old 'ard !" said Harding ; "but she didn't pay no attention. She took hold of the door, and dragged it out of my hand. It's true as I was taken by surprise and didn't put out my strength."

"A muckle strong randy of a woman," said Mrs Harding. "I think I maun have seen her the other day down by the lodge, with a bairn tied on her back in a shawl :" then suddenly perceiving her mistake, she added, "no that such a quean could have anything to do with—with our wee gentleman, if my lady's right ; and she's aye right," the house-keeper continued, in a lower tone, with keen eyes fixed on the old lord. Mrs Harding knew her master and mistress, and flattered herself that she had no small influence with them ; but part of her power, like that of many other popular oracles, consisted in her vivid perception of the variations in the minds of her employers, whom she often seemed to lead by means of prompt and instantaneous following. She was herself very much excited, very doubtful and uncertain about this strange event ; and she watched her master with a sharpness of observation which proved the urgency of the

case. As for Lord Eskside, he stood knitting his brow, and forgetting, or at least ignoring, the pair who stood, one sharply, and one dully, attentive, awaiting his next observation. When he spoke, his utterance was sharp and sudden—the abrupt issue of a long deliberation.

“Have you any reason to suppose that this—person—this woman—has been haunting the place? You say you saw her down at the lodge?”

“I saw a—beggar-wife,” said the housekeeper, subdued; “but on second thoughts, my lord——”

“D——second thoughts!” cried her master, impatiently; then turning to her husband,—“and you, Harding, had you ever seen her before?”

Harding paused; he balanced himself first on one leg and then on the other; he scratched his puzzled head, fixing his old master with his eyes, in the hope that this precaution would guard him against an outburst. “Seen her before, your lordship?” Harding said finally, with caution; “I’ve seen—a many like her——”

“Fool! can’t you answer a plain question?” cried his master, furious. “Had you seen *her* before? could you recognise *her* again?”

“My lord, I’m no wanting to interfere out of a woman’s sphere,” said the housekeeper. “You ken better than me, both your lordship and *him*; but if you’ll just consider—— He saw her one moment, nae mair. He was sair taken by surprise; it was dark, and the wind blowing wild, and the rain in his face. You should see the hall, a’ weet where it came in—and just one moment, my lord! If it had been myself he would scarce have kent me. And his een are no so shairp as they once were, your lordship well knows.”

“Oh ay, Marg’ret, I know; you take his part whatever happens——”

“And wha but me should take his part, when he’s my man?” said the housekeeper, triumphantly. As soon as she had brought that reluctant impatient smile momentarily to her master’s face, she was safe, she knew. Lord Eskside stood lost in his own thoughts for some time before he dismissed them, forgetting their existence, though to them he was the centre of the earth, and could not be forgotten. When at last, coming to himself abruptly, he waved his hand and muttered something about the night being too far spent for further action, the pair left the room with very

different sentiments. Harding, who had not yet recovered the discomfort of his watch in the wet avenue, was too thankful to be spared further trouble to disturb himself with any questions ; but his wife, more interested, partly from her deeper concern in all that affected the family, and partly, perhaps, from mere feminine preoccupation with the mystery, was by no means satisfied. "Is my lady right ?" she kept saying to herself ; and put the evidence together with that strange ability and clearheadedness which family servants, whose entire intelligence is absorbed in the facts of a family history, so often show. My lady was generally right—at least her opinions were generally approved and adopted by the household, which comes to much the same thing ; but there was a huge gulf of doubt before her, which Mrs Harding contemplated with a disquieted mind. How could this beggar's brat be the heir of Eskside ? He was like the Rosses ; he was called by their favourite name—"a daftlike name, no doubt, and out of the common," the housekeeper acknowledged to herself ; but yet the difficulties overbalanced the probabilities in the judgment of this keen though homely observer. She drove her husband nearly frantic by dwelling upon the subject all the night long. "It ain't none of our business," said Harding ; "trust my lord and my lady to mind theirselves ; it ain't got nothing to say to us." He was very glad to get rid of so troublesome a question, and to mind his work, as he said ; for a better servant, as both his master and mistress often declared, was not to be found in Scotland. His wife had her faults ; but she lay awake half the night pondering this strange incident while he slept the sleep of the just, unburdened by any anxieties. But he was more exact than she was (with her disturbed mind) about the comfort of the household next morning. On the whole, it is difficult to say which kind of service is the best.

Lord Eskside remained for some time longer in his study, and then he went up-stairs to the drawing-room, to join the ladies. Lady Eskside, however, was not to be found there, and a certain look of agitation was in the place of which she was the natural soul. She had gone up to "the nursery,"—long disused and unaccustomed words !—to sit by the child's bedside, and brood over his slumbers. Mary Percival was sitting by the fire alone, with a book upon her lap, which she did not even pretend to read. The fire was low, the

lamp was low, the room was less bright than usual, and everything told of some occurrence which had broken the ordinary calm. Mary put her book aside and took up some knitting which lay on the table, when the old lord entered and took his position on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire as usual ; but her knitting was a mere pretence, as her reading had been—the pretence of a pretence, for she only held it vaguely in her hand. For some little time nothing was said except a few commonplaces consequent on Lord Eskside's curt impatient remarks. How bad the lights were ! it was the lamp that had run down, Mary said ; and went and screwed it up again, with a hand that trembled. Where was my lady ?—She had gone up-stairs ; Mary did not know if she meant to come down again ; perhaps, having been a good deal shaken, she had gone to bed. Humph ! Lord Eskside said, working his under lip, and bending his shaggy brows. Mary felt pained and embarrassed, like a stranger involved in a family quarrel, and obliged to explain the conduct of one member of a household to another ; and she felt the silence almost intolerable as she sat down again, and took her knitting in her hand. At last the old lord rushed abruptly into the all-absorbing subject, as was his way.

“ What do *you* think of all this, Mary ? You’re a sensible girl. Is my lady out of her mind ? or what’s to be done about this—child ? ”

“ Oh, Lord Eskside,” said Mary, with tremulous agitation, “ how could she be wrong on such a point ? It is Richard’s child.”

“ How should she not be wrong ? how is any one to know ? a nameless brat, without sign or surety ; probably some gipsy’s spawn or other. Right ! It could be but a guess at the best.”

“ You did not see him,” said Mary, faltering. “ He is like—his father.”

“ Like his father ! ” cried Lord Eskside ; and he began to pace up and down the long, large, partially lighted room, a moving atom in it, yet supreme in his disturbed and disturbing humanity ; “ like his father !—very probably—but how can we tell who is his father ? I think my lady, poor soul, has gone out of her mind.”

“ But you have not seen him,” said Mary, softly, not knowing what to say.

"I have seen the creature, a little dark toad. Diek was always fair and feeble like my mother's family, a fusionless being. We must write for him, and have his opinion. God bless me, Mary ! if they both hold to it, mother and son, and this foundling grows up as heir to the property, how is he ever to establish his title ? We'll have Sandy Pringle down upon us with all the Scots law at his finger-ends—and what am I, a reasonable man, to do ? "

"Oh, Lord Eskside, that is a long way off," cried Mary, laying hold of the first argument that occurred to her.

"Things are none the easier for being a long way off," said the old lord ; and then he fell silent, pacing up and down the room, and finally returned to his place on the hearth-rug, where he stood pondering and waiting for his wife, whose hasty conclusions he so much objected to, yet whose presence and energy bore him up. Had she been there to argue with him, the strange thing that had occurred would have looked real. But in her absence what could Lord Eskside do but fret and fume ? Mary and her gentle arguments were unsubstantial to him as any of the other shadows that filled the silent and deserted room.

CHAPTER V.

RICHARD Ross had not visited his parents for years. He had scarcely been at home at all since the miserable catastrophe which had so fatally enlightened the world as to the folly of his marriage ; and perhaps the certainty that he must come now contributed something to his mother's rapture in the recovery of his child : for the instinct of nature overcomes all its unlikenesses ; and Richard, though a man whom she would have laughed at and scorned had he not been her son, was, being her son, dearer than all the world to Lady Eskside. The new event which had happened was important enough, and his mother's appeal was still more urgent and imperative ; but I doubt if it would be true to say that there was any excitement of feeling, any happiness of anticipation in Richard's mind as he travelled home in obedience to the call. Nearly seven years had elapsed since his child-

ren were taken from him, and they had been too young to take any permanent hold on his affections. That they were his children was all that could be said ; and in Richard's mind, as time went on and he began to regard his misfortunes with a kind of hopeless apathy, they had come to be more like shadows of their mother than independent beings possessing rights and claims of their own. The first effect of the news was to rouse him to a painful sense of his own dismal shipwreck and hopeless failure in life, rather than to any excitement of a more tender kind. Those great personal misfortunes which change the complexion of our lives may fall into the background, they may cease to render us actively and always wretched ; but they lie in wait, keeping, as it were, ever within reach, to wake into hot recollection at a touch. Most of us prefer to avoid that touch when we can, and Richard had done this more persistently and with greater success than most people ; but yet they lay there ready, the shame and the pain, wanting nothing but a jog to bring them out in full force.

I would not go the length of saying that he was touched by no feeling of thankfulness that his child was restored ; but his pleasure was infinitely less than the suffering he went through by means of this revival of all that was most painful in his life. He had long outgrown the boyish passion which led to his strange marriage ; and as he had nothing to look back upon in connection with that marriage which was not miserable and humiliating, it was not wonderful that shame and self-disgust were his most lively sensations when it was recalled to him. He could not understand how he could have been guilty of folly so supreme and so intense ; how he could have bartered his credit, his comfort, all the better part of life, not to speak of that hot love of youth, which in calmer years often looks so much like folly, even when it is happy and fortunate—for what? Nothing. He had not even, so far as he knew, touched the heart of the woman for whom he had made so extraordinary a sacrifice. At best she had but accepted and submitted to his love ; she had never loved him ; his influence had not wrought any change in her. He had not even affected her being so much as to induce her to give up the habits of her former life, or show any inclination to learn the habits of his. She had humiliated him in every way, and in no way so much as by allowing him to perceive his own impotence in regard to her.

self. This gave the last sting of bitterness to his recollections. A man can bear the outer annoyances which result from a foolish marriage ; he can put up, patiently or otherwise, with much that would revolt him in any other less close and binding connection ; but when, in addition to these, he is made to feel that he himself is nothing and less than nothing to the creature for whom he has made such sacrifices, it is inevitable, or almost inevitable, that the early infatuation should change into a very different feeling. Sometimes, it is true, the victim of passion, notwithstanding all enlightenment, continues in his subjection, and goes on adoring even where he despises ; but such cases are rare, and Richard's was not one of them. I cannot understand any more than his mother could, how "a son of hers" could have ever made so extraordinary a mistake in life ; but now that his existence was permanently ruined and devastated by this great blunder, Richard had felt that his best policy was to ignore it utterly. He had lived a celibate and blameless life during all those years of enforced widowhood. Society knew vaguely that he had been married, and most people thought him a widower ; but though much in the world, he had lived so as to avoid all disagreeable inquiries into the actual facts of the case. He had never betrayed even to his friends the blight which had stopped all progress in life for him. According to all precedent of fiction, some other woman ought to have stepped across his path and learned his secret, as Mr Thackeray's Laura does by George Warrington. But Richard Ross had indulged in no Laura. He had friends enough and to spare, but never any close enough or dear enough to warrant scandal. Instead of Platonic affections he had taken to china, a safer weakness ; and it was to this tranquil gentleman in the midst of his collections that the mother's letter came, thrusting back upon his recollection the dismal and humiliating melodrama of which he had been the hero. It is not difficult to imagine in the circumstances with what bitter annoyance he bore this revival of all his miseries, and girded himself up to answer the summons, and for the first time appear at home.

He arrived on a spring night as mild as the former one I have described had been boisterous. The sun had just set, and the rosy clouds hung above the trees of Rosseraig, and over the hillside, just tinged here and there with the bursting of the spring buds, but still for the most part brown and

leafless, which sloped to the brawling Esk. I do not know a fairer scene anywhere. Some old turrets of the older part of the house, belonging to that style of domestic architecture which is common to France and to Scotland, peeped forth above the lofty slope of the bank. Had winter been coming, the brown, unclothed trees might have conveyed an impression of sadness; but as spring was coming they were all hopeful, specially where the green breaks of new foliage, big chestnut buds, and silken leaves still creased and folded, threw a wash of delicate colour upon the landscape. Richard's heart was somewhat touched by the feeling that he was approaching home; but the more his heart was touched the less he was inclined to show it; for had not he himself injured the perfection of that home, which was surrounded by people *who knew*, and who could not but comment and criticise? He heaved an impatient sigh, even while his heart was melting to the dear familiar place, and wished himself away again among people who knew nothing about him, even though he felt the many charms of home steal into his heart.

Richard Ross was a year or two over thirty—a young man, though he did not feel young—tall and fair, with a placid temper and the gentlest manners; a man to all appearance as free from passion and as prone to every virtuous and gentle affection as man could be. His aspect, indeed, was that of a very model of goodness and English domestic perfection—a man who would be the discreetest of guides to his household, the best of fathers, an example to all surrounding him. This was what he ought to have been. Had he married Mary Percival this is what he would have been; though I think it very likely that Mary would have wearied of him without knowing why, and found life—had she had him—a somewhat languid performance. But, unfortunately, she was quite unconscious of what would have happened had the might have been ever come to pass, and did not know that she missed some evil as well as some good. On the contrary, her heart beat far more than she would have wished it to beat when the roll of the carriage-wheels which conveyed Richard was heard in the avenue. She stole out by the conservatory-door to be out of the way, and hid herself in the woods which slope downward to Eskside. She scarcely heard the brawl of Esk, so loud was her heart beating. Poor Mary! it was not Richard

alone who had come back and had to be met with tranquilly, as one stranger meets another—but her youth and all her fancies, and those anticipations long past which were so different from the reality. Mary stayed under the budding trees till almost the last ray of daylight had faded, and the bell from the house, calling all stragglers, tinkled from the height among the evening echoes. This bell of itself was a sign that something had happened: Lord and Lady Eskside were homely in their ways, and it was never rung when they were alone.

Lady Eskside received her son with the child by her side, going forward to meet him with little Val clinging to her hand; but when she forgot Val and threw her arms round her own boy whom she had not seen for so long, the child, bewildered, shifted his grasp to her gown, which he held fast, somewhat appalled as well as jealous at the appearance of this new-comer. It was not until after Richard had received his father's less effusive greeting that even Lady Eskside bethought herself of the occasion of the visit—the little silent spectator, who, half buried in the folds of her gown, watched everything with keen eyes. "Ah!" she cried; then with a self-reproach for her own carelessness, "I think of my boy first, without minding that you are thinking of yours. Come, Val, and speak to your papa. Oh, Richard! oh, my dear! here is the child—"

"Oh!—this is the child, is it?" said Richard, with a momentary faintness coming over him. He did not snatch the little fellow into his arms, as his mother expected he would. He did something very different, for the poor man was short-sighted, a thing which none of us can help. He took up nervously that double eyeglass which the French call a *pince-nez*, and put it on his nose. He could not have seen otherwise had his heart been ever so tender; but it would be impossible to describe the shock, the chill, which this simple proceeding brought upon Lady Eskside. Was there, then, no paternal instinct in her son's heart—none of the feeling which had made her own expand and glow towards the boy? Was her impulse of nature wrong, or his deadened? The old lord looked on curiously too, but with less vehement feeling, for Lady Eskside had a deeper stake in the matter. She felt that to find herself mistaken, and to have to give up the child whom she had adopted into her warmest affections, would be her death-blow.

"Richard! you don't think—your father and I—have been wrong?" she cried.

It was on Lord Eskside's lip to say that this rash adoption was none of his doing, and thus give up his wife to her fate; but he was sorry for her, and held his tongue, watching the man and the child as they stared at each other with gradually growing interest. The boy stood, holding by Lady Eskside's gown, with a baby scowl upon his soft little forehead, half raising one arm with instinctive suspicion, as he had done on the night of his arrival, to ward off an imaginary blow. Richard sat opposite and gazed at him intently through his *pince-nez*. Something pathetic, tragic, terrible, yet ludicrous, was in the scene.

"Richard," faltered Lady Eskside, "don't keep me in this suspense. Do you suppose—do you think—it is not him?"

"What is your name?" said Richard, looking at his son. "Val?—you are sure you are Val and not the other? Yes. I suppose, then, he's the eldest," he said hurriedly, getting up and walking away to the window at the other end of the room. The old couple were too much surprised to say anything. They gave a wondering glance at each other, and Lord Eskside, putting up his hand, stopped the crowd of wondering questions which was about to pour from his wife's lips. Richard stood perhaps two minutes (it seemed an hour), with his back to them, looking out from the window. When he returned, his voice was husky and his face paler. "You have done quite right, mother, to take him in," he said, in low tones, "so far as I can judge." Then, with a suddenly heightened colour, "He is like—his mother. No one who has ever seen *her* could fail to recognise *him*."

"Richard! oh, take him in your arms and give your child a kiss!" cried Lady Eskside, with tears in her eyes. "Oh, take your own mother's word, it is you the darling is like—you, and none but you!"

"Is that like me?" said Richard, touching his son's dark hair, with a harsh laugh; "or could we be mixed up, we two, in anything, even a child's face? No; one of them was hers—all hers. Don't you recollect, mother? I was pleased then, like an idiot as I was. The other," he added, with a softened voice, "was like me."

And then there was silence again. He had not touched the child or spoken to him, except that unfriendly touch;

and little Val stood by his grandmother's knee, still clutching her dress, looking on with a bewildered sense of something adverse to himself which was going on over his head, but which he did not understand. Richard threw himself into a chair, his fair, amiable face flushed with unusual emotion ; he swung back in his seat, with an uneasy smile on his face, and an expression of assumed carelessness and real excitement totally unlike his usual aspect. As for Lady Eskside, she was struck dumb ; she put her arms round the child, petting and consoling him. "My bonnie man !" she said, pressing him close to her side, comforting the little creature, who was nothing more than perplexed in his baby mind—as if he had shared the distinct pain in her own.

"Enough of this, Richard," said Lord Eskside, coming to the rescue. "Whatever has happened, it is not the boy's fault. Your mother and I have the property to think of, and the succession. It is necessary that you should give an opinion one way or another——"

"Father, I beg your pardon," said Richard, rising to his feet with a sudden flush of shame. "I allowed my feelings to get the better of me. I acknowledge the child. He is too like to be denied. Valentine was the eldest, and had dark hair, like—— I have no doubt on the subject. If my mother chooses to use her eyes, she can see the resemblance——"

"To you, Richard ! Oh, do not be bitter against the bairn ; he is like you !"

Richard smiled—a painful smile, which sat ill on a countenance of which very nature demanded gentleness. "You may bring him up, sir, as your heir ; I acknowledge him. There, mother, what do you want more of me ? I can't be a hypocrite, even for you."

"You should remember that you are his father," said the old lady, half indignant, half weeping ; "whatever may have happened, as your father says, the child is not to blame."

"No," said the young man. "Do you mean me to go, now that I have done what you wanted ? Am I to be dismissed, my business being over——"

"What do you mean, sir ?" said Lord Eskside, hotly ; "you forget that you are speaking to your mother——"

"My mother has not a word nor a look for me !" cried Richard. "She wants me for nothing but this gipsy brat, that I may own him, and advance him to my own place. I say it is hard on a man. I come back here, after years ; and

the first words that are said to me are—not to welcome me home—but to upbraid me that I do not grow maudlin all in a moment over this child."

"Richard!" cried the old lady, with a sharp tone of pain in her voice; "do you want me to think that though I have got your son I have lost mine?"

"That must be as you will, mother; you seem to prefer him," said Richard, in high offence. It was the first quarrel they had ever had in their lives; for through all his youthful errors she had stood by him always. I do not know what demon of perversity, vexation, and personal annoyance worked in him; but I do know the intense and silent disappointment with which his mother's heart closed its open doors—wide open always to him—and she turned away, all her joy changed into bitterness. When she came to think of it, she blamed herself, saying to herself that she had been injudicious in thrusting the strange little new-comer upon him the very moment of his arrival; but then she had judged him by herself—what can mortal do more?—and had believed that the boy would be his first thought.

In this way a cloud fell on the house from the very moment of Richard's return. His was not the prodigal's return, notwithstanding his long banishment and his great error. He had done more harm to his father's house than many a profligate son could have done; yet he was not wicked, but virtuous, and could not be received as a prodigal. And he, for his part, was warmly conscious of personal blamelessness, though his position, so far as other people knew, was that of one to whom much had been forgiven—a complication which was very productive of irritating feelings. I do not mean to say that the cloud lasted, or that Richard went to his room that night unreconciled with his mother. On the contrary, when Lady Eskside followed him there, with a woman's yearning, to wipe out every trace of the misunderstanding, her boy fell upon her neck as when he had been really a boy, and kissed her, and did all but lift up his voice and weep, according to the pathetic language of Scripture. Even yet, after the recollection of his petulance was thus effaced, the shock she had received tingled through his mother's heart, and indeed through her physical frame, which was beginning to be more sensitive by reason of age, vigorous woman though she was. Even without any painful occurrences in the interval, a visit like this, paid after years of separation, is often

a painful experiment. The son of Lord Eskside, a homely Scots lord, with few interests which were not national, or even local, was a very different person from the Hon. Richard Ross, senior *attaché* of the British Legation at Florence, whose life had fallen into grooves entirely different from those of home. Though he returned to all the soft kindness of his natural manner, the keen observation of the two women who were watching him (for Mary was little less interested than Lady Eskside) soon made out that Richard took little interest in his father's talk, and was quickly fatigued by his mother's questions. He did not care for the parties of country neighbours who were asked to meet him. "Of course, my dear mother, whoever you please," he would say, with a faint little contraction in his smooth forehead ; but then probably that was because those country neighbours knew all about him, and understood that they were invited to eat the fatted calf, and celebrate a prodigal's return.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER this first experience of his feeling on the subject, Lady Eskside, though with a painful effort, wisely resolved to avoid further embarrassment by letting things fall into their natural course, and making no effort to thrust his child upon Richard's notice. The little fellow, already familiar with the house, and fully reconciled, with a child's ease and *insouciance*, to the change in his lot, ran about everywhere, making the great hall resound with his voice, and beginning to reign over Harding and the rest of the servants, as the spoiled darling, the heir of the race, is apt to do, especially in the house of its grandparents. The only person Val was shy of was his father, who took little or no notice of him, but after his first introduction expressed no active feeling towards the child one way or another. Perhaps, indeed, Richard was slightly ashamed of that uncalled-for demonstration of his feelings. Valentine was his son, whether he liked it or not, and must be his heir and representative as well as his father's ; and though it never occurred to him to contemplate the moment when he himself should reign in his

father's stead, he felt it wise to make up his mind that his boy should do so, and to give his parents the benefit of his own experience as to Val's education. "You must be prepared for an ungovernable temper and utter unreasonableness," he said to his mother, making a decided and visible effort to open the subject.

"My dear, there is nothing of the kind," cried Lady Eskside, eagerly; "the bairn is but a bairn, and thoughtless—but nothing of the kind can I see—"

"He is seven years old, and he is fooled to the top of his bent—everybody gives in to him," said Richard. "Mark my words, mother,—this is what you will have to strive against. Self-control is unknown to that development of character. So long as they don't care very much for anything, all may go well; but the moment that he takes a fancy into his head—"

Mary was present at this interview, and it was not in human nature to refrain from a glance at his mother to see how she received this lofty delineation of a character which Richard evidently thought entirely different from his own. Lady Eskside saw the glance, and understood it, and faltered in her reply.

"Many do that, my dear," she said, meekly, "that are gentle enough in appearance. I will remember all the hints you give me. But Val, though he is very high-spirited, is a good child. I think I shall be able to manage him."

"Send him to school," said Richard—"that is the best way; let him find his level at school. Send him to Eton, if you like, when he is old enough, but in the mean time, if my advice is worth anything, put him under some strict master who will keep him well in hand, at once. My dear mother, you are too good, you will spoil him. With the blood he has in his veins he wants a firmer hand."

"My hand is getting old, no doubt," said Lady Eskside, with a little glow of rising colour.

"I do not mean that; you are not old—you will never be old," said her son, with that flattery which mothers love. This put the disagreeable parts of his previous speech out of her mind. She smiled at her boy, and said, "Nonsense, Richard!" with fond pleasure. To be sure it was nonsense; but then nonsense is often so much better than the sagest things which wisdom itself can say.

As for the meeting with Mary Percival, that was got over

more easily than she herself could have expected. There were so many other things in Richard's mind that he took her presence there the first evening as a matter of course ; and though that too had its sting, she was so great a comfort and help to them all in the excitement and embarrassment involved in the first meeting, that Mary was made into a person of the first importance—a position which always sheds balm upon the mind of one who has been, or thinks she has been, slighted. This state of comfort was somewhat endangered next morning, when Richard thought it proper to express his sense of her great kindness in coming to meet him. "It was very good of you," he said—"like yourself ; you were always much kinder to me than I deserved." Now this is not a kind of acknowledgment which sensitive women are generally much delighted to receive, from men of their own age at least.

"Was I ?" said Mary, trying to laugh ; "but in this case at least I had no intention of being kind. I was here before there was any question of your coming ; and I do not know that I should have stayed—for when she has you, Lady Esk-side wants no other companion—but that I was very anxious to know about Val."

"I ought to be grateful to Val," said Richard ; "he seems to have supplanted me with all my friends—even my mother is more interested, a great deal, in Val's digestion, than she is in my tastes, nowadays. I have to fall back upon the consolation of all whose day is over. It was not always so."

There was the slightest touch of bitterness in this, which partially conciliated Mary, though it would be difficult to tell why.

"I suppose that is a consolation," she said. "I feel it too ; but in your case there is no occasion. They worship the child because he is your son."

"Yes, it is a consolation," said Richard, "so far as anything can console one for the loss of opportunities, the change of circumstances. I find it safer to say nothing on such subjects, and to live among people who know nothing ; but now that I am forced to stand here again, to recollect all that might have been——"

It was a still afternoon, the sun shining with lavish warmth and force, the grass growing, the leaves opening, so that you could almost see their silent haste of progress. They were standing on the terrace outside the windows, looking down

over the brown woods all basking in the sunshine, to Esk, which showed here and there in a wider eddy of foam round some great boulder which interrupted his course. It was too early for the twitter of swallows ; but some of those hardy birds that dwell all the year at home were interchanging their genial babble, deep among the multitudinous branches, and a few daring insects hummed in the air which was so full of sunshine. Floods of golden crocus had come out on all the borders. It was not the moment for recollection ; but these words raised a swell and expansion of feeling in Mary's heart which it was not safe to indulge. Soft moisture came to her eyes. Happily that rush of sensation was not strong enough to make her wretched, but it confused her so much that she could not reply.

" All the same," said Richard, quickly, " I do not agree with Browning in his rapture over an English spring. You should see Italy at this season : everything here is pale, a mere shadow of the radiance yonder. From Bellosuardo, for instance, looking down upon Florence ; you have never been in Italy, Mary ?—a sky to which this is darkness, air all lambent with light and warmth, such towers, such roofs rising up into it, and the Val-d'Arno stretching away in delicious distance, like the sea, as ignorant people say—as if the sea could ever be so full of grace and interest ! It is, I suppose, the junction of art with exquisite nature which gives such a landscape its great charm. Here we have nature to be sure, pretty enough in its way ; but everything that man touches is monstrous. Those square horrible houses ! Happily we don't see them here."

The soft flow of feeling which had risen in Mary's mind, and had filled her eyes with moisture, suddenly turned into gall. " No," she said, " I have never been in Italy. I don't know that I want to go. I prefer to think my own country the most beautiful in the world."

" Well," said Richard, " perhaps if you are obliged to live in it all your life it is the most philosophical way."

How little Mary was thinking of philosophy at that moment ! It was well for her that his mother came out from the open window, ready to walk down to the village, which she had made her son promise somewhat unwillingly to do. " Mary will go with us," Lady Eskside had said as an inducement to Richard, not perhaps taking Mary's inclinations much into account ; for, of course (she reckoned securely),

Mary would put her own feelings in her pocket rather than take away a motive from Richard to do his duty; and there could be no doubt that it was his duty to visit the old people who remembered him, and who would be wounded if he took no notice of them. "We must go to our old Merran's, your nurse that used to be. She is married to the smith, you remember, Richard ? and doing well, I believe, though always a great gossip, as she was when she was a young woman. Her son has come to be under-gamekeeper, and your father thinks he will give him one of the lodges if he turns out well, for he is going to be married," said Lady Eskside, walking briskly down the winding path through the wood, which was shorter than the avenue,—and full of a country lady's satisfaction in that sway over her humble neighbours and full knowledge of their concerns which is so good for both parties. Richard went dutifully by her side, and listened at least; while Mary came behind with little Valentine in wonderful new fine clothes, velvet and lace, the strangest contrast to his former appearance. He had been a beautiful child in his poor garments ; he was like a little prince now, with aristocrat (a stranger would have said) written in every fine line of those features, upon which the noble father and the vagrant mother had both impressed their image. The mother not being by, the child was universally wondered over for his resemblance to his father ; but to that father's eyes Val had nothing that had not come to him from the other—that other who had once been Richard's idol, and now was his enemy and his shame.

Merran Miller, you may be sure, had heard every word of the story, and more, and knew exactly how the beautiful boy, in his fantastic, costly dress, had been brought to Rossraig, and remembered how she had herself seen him make his entry into his future kingdom, muddy and crying, "a beggar-wean" by the side of the mother who went to lodge at Jean Macfarlane's. She knew it all, but this did not lessen the warmth of her enthusiasm for Mr Richard's boy, the bonnie wee gentleman who was so like his papaw. "Eh, bless him, he's like a prince ! I wish the queen herself might have the like !" she cried, with all the loyalty of an old retainer, and wiped her eyes with her apron at thought of the kindness of Mr Richard coming so far to see "the like of me !" Richard, after he had said all that was civil to his old nurse, fell back, while his mother inquired into her domestic affairs, and in-

formed her of Lord Eskside's intended favour to the young gamekeeper who was about to be married. "We cannot forget that you were a good nurse to our boy," said the old lady, gracious in her happiness; "and as Providence has been good to us, giving us back our grandchild, who is the heir, and his father at the same time, my lord and myself take a pleasure in seeing other folk happy too." "Eh, my lady, but you're kind and good! and what can I say to you for my Willie—for such a grand start in life!" cried Merran, once more applying her apron to her eyes. Richard strayed aside, and would have fallen back upon Mary, not feeling much interest in this conversation, had not Mary, still affronted, eluded his address.

But as he looked round the cottage, something which interested him still more attracted his eye. It was the "aumrie" or oak press in which Merran and her mother before her had kept their "napery" for ages. The connoisseur rushed at it, and examined every line of its old carving; he opened the doors and looked over all the drawers and intricacies inside. "Here is something as fine as any piece of furniture in your house. Ask her if she will part with it," he said rapidly to his mother in French. His blue eyes sparkled with pleasant excitement, and his colour rose. Since he came back, nothing—not his unknown child, not his parents, not Mary, nor the associations of home—had given him so warm a glow of pleasurable feeling. He was in his natural element once more.

It became still more apparent, however, and in a more agreeable way, how much Richard was changed when the first dinner-party convoked in his honour assembled at Ross-craig. The best people in the county were there, straining a point to show the dear old Esksides (as the Dowager-Duchess herself said) that for their sake their son's misdoings would be overlooked, and himself received again as if nothing had happened. They all came prepared to be kind to him, to forget the disgrace he had brought upon himself and his family, and to condone all past offences on condition of future good conduct. But lo! Richard was civil to the people who had intended to be good to *him*—he received them with the quiet self-assured air of a man of the world, which was ever so far removed from that of the conscious offender against social laws whom they had come to meet. He spoke with a certain gentle authority as a man much bet-

ter acquainted with the great world and the highest levels of life than were his critics—giving them pieces of information about political matters, and deciding which was the real version of fashionable scandals in a way which struck the neighbours dumb. “My dears, we are all under a delusion,” said the same Dowager-Duchess whom we have already quoted, addressing a little group in the corner of the drawing-room to which they had retired to compare notes, and make their astonished comments on leaving the dinner-table. “Depend upon it it’s no tramp he has married, but some foreign princess. He’s no more ashamed of himself than I am.” And, indeed, a rumour to this effect ran through all Mid-Lothian. In the dining-room all the gentlemen were equally impressed. Before they rose from table, Sir John Gifford, the greatest land-owner in the district, and son-in-law to the Marquess of Tranent, asked Richard’s opinion as to what the Ministry would do about the then existing crisis (I do not remember what it was) in foreign politics; and they all listened to what he said about the state of feeling in Italy, and the condition of the smaller courts, as if it had been gospel. “That son of Eskside’s, whatever he may have done to compromise himself in his youth, is a rising man, you may take my word for it,” Sir John said solemnly at the next assembly of the county. “And the less we inquire into most men’s youth the better, my dear Sir John,” said the Dowager-Duchess, of whose tongue most people stood in awe; and Sir John coloured, and felt more and more sympathetic with Dick Ross; for he, too, had known the drawbacks of a *jeunesse orageuse*.

This revolution was made not gradually but in a single evening. The first dinner-party at Rosscraig was intended more or less to represent that entertainment at which the fatted calf was eaten; but in the curious change of sentiment that ensued there was no more thought of fatted calves. The indulgent reception intended to be given to the exile, almost the outlaw, of whom every one had spoken for years with bated breath, turned imperceptibly into the welcome accorded to a distinguished guest. Richard’s manners were allowed to be perfect; he had all the *savoir vivre*, the easy grace, the perfect self-possession of a man of the world. He knew everybody, he had seen everything; he was learned in art of every description, from the old masters in painting to lace and china; and every lady in

the county who possessed either was proud of his approbation. Perhaps he was not quite so great out of doors, where neither agriculture nor sport were in his way ; but men forgive much to a political authority, as women do to a connoisseur, and Richard's visit was an event in the neighbourhood. Lady Eskside's feelings on witnessing this revolution were of the strangest. She watched it with a certain consternation, half frightened, half triumphant ; the poor boy's humiliation and sufferings, she said to herself, were all being repaid to him ; yet Lady Eskside was a just woman, and I do not think she was quite sure that Richard deserved to be thus received with an ovation. But where was there ever a mother who did not glow with pride and happiness to see her son the observed of all observers, the hero of her world ? Mary Percival, who stood by and looked on closely, a spectator less prejudiced in Richard's favour, yet full of the keenest interest, wondered still more, judging him differently in her heart. Mary's feelings were of a kind which would not bear analysing. She could not keep from watching him, she heard everything that was said of him, she noted his words and actions with a keen and never-failing concern ; but this wondering interest and a partial amusement which pained herself, yet would not be altogether subdued, were not sympathy. She seemed to herself to be behind the scenes, and to see more than the rest did ; and by this means it came about that the rush of blood to her heart, and the thrill through all her frame with which Mary had acknowledged Richard's approach at first in spite of herself, died away and left her quite calm as all the world awoke to his merits. This second and less important revolution Lady Eskside perceived dimly, but did not understand.

However, Richard's sudden popularity was the most fortunate incident possible for his child. Many people, after the first eager interest with which they had received the romantic story of little Val's first appearance at RossCraig, began to doubt it because it was so romantic, and pointed out to each other the much more likely and sensible way of accounting for it. "The beggar-wife is all a myth, depend upon it," said the Dowager-Duchess,—"a myth founded upon the popular conviction that Dick Ross was unfortunate in his marriage. Most of us are unfortunate in our marriages ; but it seldom comes to that sort of thing. No, no :

depend upon it, the child came with his father, as was natural and proper. What better explanation would you have?" There can be no doubt that this method of introducing a child who is heir to a peerage is a much more comprehensible and reasonable one than a wild tale by which he was represented as having been thrust in at the hall-door on a stormy night. There had been much excitement caused by the story; but that very excitement was a proof to many sober people that it was ridiculous. Why search further? they said. His father had come home on a visit, a very rising young man, and extremely agreeable, and he had brought the child with him. Valentine's appearance confirmed the district in this sensible view of the question. In his velvet tunic and collar of falling lace, he was utterly unlike anything but a dainty little dandy born to luxury and bred with every care, whose cheek the winds had never been allowed to touch rudely. To look at the child was quite enough, said many. He to have been wandering about the country with a tramp!—the idea was preposterous. He was a little aristocrat all over—from his dark curls to the buckles on his dainty shoes. And when the gentry of the country inquired, as they almost all did individually, into the origin of the other absurd story, it was universally traced to the servants' hall. My Lady Gifford's maid had got it from Joseph the footman at Rossraig, and the Dowager-Duchess had heard it from an under-gardener who kept the lodge, and with whom she did not disdain an occasional gossip. There is no limit to the imagination of persons in that class of life, many people said; and it became a mark of fashion on Eskside by which you could decide whether any individual really belonged to the cream of society or not. Belief in the common-sense theory that (of course) Richard had brought his son to his mother's care, was for a long time the shibboleth of the county. Those who had faith in the romantic part of the story were given over to a reprobate imagination, and stamped themselves vulgar at once by adopting a theory so ridiculous. Nothing could have been more fortunate for the young heir. Lady Eskside awoke to the importance of maintaining this "sensible" view before she had been tempted to utter the true occasion of her joy to any dear friend. Nobody knew the real facts of the case except Mary and the servants. Mary was safe as Lady Eskside

herself, and as careful of the honour of the family ; and as for the servants, with their well-known love of the marvellous, how could any one pin his faith on them ? Thus circumstances arranged themselves for little Val a hundred times better than the most sanguine imagination could have believed.

But the story lingered in the lower levels of society, where nobody was deceived. Merran Miller herself, though she had been Richard's nurse, and felt herself a partisan of the family, paused to give an elaborate description of the child and his finery to her friends, when, throwing her apron over her cap, she rushed out to proclaim her Willie's good fortune to all the world : "I wish I was at the bottom o't," cried Merran ; "it's an awfu' queer story. I'm real glad now that it came into my head to give the weans a piece, and that I was civil to the woman. But to see you bairn decked up like a cheeny image ! and him gaun greeting with a beggar-wife nae later than Wednesday at e'en——!"

CHAPTER VII.

"RICHARD, there is one disagreeable subject which, as you said nothing about it, I have avoided as long as possible ; but I must speak now, before you go."

Lady Eskside had led her son out upon the terrace the evening before he was to leave. She was dressed for dinner in her black satin gown, with a lace cap and stomacher, which even his fastidious eye approved. She had come to the age when little change of costume is possible. Sometimes she wore velvet instead of satin, but that was about all the variety she made, and her lace was her only vanity. She had a crimson Indian scarf thrown over her head and shoulders. Her erect old figure was still as trim, and her step as springy, as any girl's. She was the picture of an old lady, everybody allowed ;—and it was true she was old—yet full of an unquenchable youth. She had taken her son by the arm in the interval before dinner, and led him out into the open air to speak to him. Perhaps it was an inopportune moment ; but it was a subject for which she felt a few minutes were enough, as it could not but be painful to both.

"Well, mother," he said, with a tone of resignation. He was going next day, which gave him strength to bear this ordeal, whatever its cause might be.

"I have said nothing to you—indeed, indeed, I have wished to say nothing — about — Richard, my dear boy, listen to me with patience, I will not keep you long—about—Val's mother—your wife."

"What about her ?" said Richard, with harsh brevity. He made a movement almost as if to throw off his mother's arm.

"My dear, you must not think this subject is less disagreeable to me than to you. Nothing has been said about her for a long time—"

"And why should anything be said about her ?" said Richard. "In such a hopeless business, what is the advantage of discussion ? She has chosen her path in life, which is not the same as mine."

His soft and gentle face set into a harsh rigidity : it grew stern, almost severe. "Come indoors, mother—the evening gets cold," he added, after a pause.

"Just a word, Richard—just one word ! Do you not see a trace of something different rising in her ? She has brought back your boy : I suppose she thinks, poor thing, that it is just she should have one of them—"

"Mother," said Richard, "I am astonished at your charity. You say, poor thing. Do you remember that she has ruined your son's life ?"

Lady Eskside made no answer. She looked at him wistfully, with an evident repression of something that rose to her lips.

"She has been my curse," said Richard, vehemently. "For God's sake, if she will leave us alone, let us leave her alone. She has made my life a desert. Is it choice, do you think, that makes me an outcast from my own country ? that shuts me out from everything your son and my father's son ought to have been ? Why cannot I take my proper place in society—my natural place ? You know well enough what the answer is—she is the cause. She has been my ruin : she is the curse of my life."

He spoke almost with passion, growing not red but white in the intensity of his feelings. Lady Eskside looked at him, kept looking at him, with a face in which sympathy shone—along with some other expression not so easy to be defined.

"Richard," she said, in a low voice, "all you say is true—who can know it better than I do? but oh, my dear, mind! she could have had no power on your life, if you had not given it to her—of your free will."

"So, then, it is I alone who am to blame?" said Richard, with a laugh, which was half rage and half scorn. "I might have known that was what you were sure to say."

"Yes, you might have known it," said Lady Eskside—"for nothing, I hope, will ever shut my mind to justice; but not because I am in the habit of reproaching you, Richard—for that I never did, even when you had made my heart sore; but we need not quarrel about it, you and me. What I want to know is, if you do not see now the still greater importance of getting some hold upon her—for Valentine's—for all our sakes?"

"You will never get a hold upon her: it is folly to dream of it. She is beyond your reach, or that of any reasonable creature. Mother, come in—the bell must have rung for dinner."

"I have written to the man we employed before," said Lady Eskside, hurriedly. "This was what I wanted to say. Do not stare at me, Richard! I will not put up with it. I must do my duty as I see it, and whatever comes of it. I have given him all the particulars I could, and told him to try every means, and lose no time. Her heart must be soft after giving up her child."

"So," said Richard, with a quivering pale smile, "you consult me what should be done after all the steps have been taken. This is kind! You have taken care to provide for my domestic comfort, mother—"

"If we should find her—which God grant!—I will take charge of her," said Lady Eskside, with a flush of resentment. "Neither your comfort nor your pride shall be interfered with—never fear."

"You are most considerate, mother," said Richard. "Your house, then, is to be finally closed to me, after the effort I have made to revisit it? Well, after all, I suppose the Palazzo Graziani suits me best."

"You are cruel to say so, Richard," said his mother. Tears came quickly to her bright old eyes; but at that moment Lord Eskside looked out from one of the drawing-room windows, and stayed the further progress of the quarrel.

"What are you two doing there, philandering like a lad and a lass?" said the old lord. "Richard, bring your mother in; she'll catch cold. There's a heavy dew falling, though it's a fine night."

"It is my mother who insists on staying out in the night air, which I disapprove of," said Richard. "The Italians have a prejudice on the subject of sunset. They think it the most dangerous hour of the day. I am so much of an Italian now—and likely to be more so—that I have taken up their ideas; at least so far as sunset is concerned."

"So much an Italian—and likely to be more so!—I hope not, I hope not, Richard," said his father. "After this good beginning you have made, it will be hard upon your poor mother and me if we cannot tempt you home."

"Or drive me away for ever," said Richard, so low that his mother only heard him. She grasped his arm with a sudden vehemence of mingled love and anger, which for the moment startled him, and then dropped it, and stepped in through the window, letting the subject drop altogether. She was unusually bright at dinner, excited, as it seemed, by the sharp little encounter she had just had, which had stirred up all her powers. Lord Eskside, who was not of a fanciful nature, and whose moods did not change so quickly, regarded her with some suspicion. He was himself depressed by his son's approaching departure, and somewhat disposed to be angry, as he generally was when depressed.

"You must have been saying something to your mother to raise her spirits," he said, after one or two ineffectual attempts to subdue her—when Richard and he were left to their claret.

"Not I, sir," said Richard, "on the contrary; my mother has ideas with which I disagree entirely."

"Ay, boy, to be sure," said the old lord, "she was saying something to me. Then it was opposition, and not satisfaction as I thought? You see, Richard, women have their own ways of thinking. We cannot always follow their reasoning; but in the main your mother's perhaps right."

And having said this, in mild backing up of his wife's bolder suggestions, Lord Eskside changed the subject and spoke of the property, and of new leases he was granting, and the improvement of the estate.

"There is a great deal of land about Lasswade that might be feued very advantageously—but I would not do it with-

out ascertaining your feeling on the subject, Richard. It can't make much difference in my time; but in the course of nature that time can't be very long."

"I wish it might be a hundred years," said Richard, with no false sentiment; for indeed, apart from natural affection, to be Lord Eskside and live up here in the paternal *château* among the woods did not charm his imagination much.

"That is all very pleasant for you to say," said his father, receiving and dismissing the compliment with a wave of his hand; "but, as I say, in the course of nature my time must be but short. There is just the question about the amenities, upon which every man has his own opinions——"

"The—— what did you say?" asked Richard, puzzled.

"The amenities of the place. It is true the village is not visible from the house, but if in the future you were to find the new houses that might be built an eyesore——"

"That is entirely a British notion," Richard answered, with a smile; "I think great part of the beauty in Italy is from the universal life you see everywhere—villages climbing up every hillside. No; I have no English prejudices on that point."

"I don't know that it's an English prejudice," said Lord Eskside, who never forgot the distinction between English and Scotch as his son invariably did. "Then you don't object to feuing? Willie Maitland will be a proud man. He has told me often I might add a thousand a-year to the income of the property by judicious feus. They will be taken up by all kind of shopkeeper bodies, retired tradesmen, and the like—a consideration which gives me little trouble, Richard, but may perhaps act upon you. No? Well, you're a philosopher: they're bad at an election; they're totally beyond control—unless, indeed, your mother and I were to put ourselves out of our way to visit and make of them; but we would want a strong inducement for that."

Here Lord Eskside looked at his son with a look of veiled entreaty, not saying anything; and Richard knew his father well enough to comprehend.

"You must not think of that, sir,—indeed you must not. Am I in a position to be set up before the county, and have every fact of my life brought up against me? No, father, anything else you like—but let me stay among strangers, where the circumstances of my existence need not be inquired into."

"I don't know that you have anything to be ashamed of," said Lord Eskside, with a husky voice.

"Anyhow, I cannot offer myself as a subject to be discussed by all the world," said Richard. Courage, he said to himself—to-morrow and all this will be over! He made a strenuous effort to be patient, strengthened by the thought.

"Well, Richard, if you have made up your mind—but you know our wishes," said the old lord with a sigh. Little Val had been exercising his grandfather's temper by his excursions round the table a little while before. He had been obstinate and childishly disobedient till he was carried off by the ladies; and Lord Eskside, somewhat out of temper, as I have said, by reason of being depressed in spirits, had been ready to augur evil of the child's future career. But the contradiction of Val's father was more grave. When he resisted his parent's wishes it was of little use to be angry. The old lord sighed with a dreary sense that nothing was to be made by struggling. Of all hopeless endeavours that of attempting to make your children carry out the plans you have formed, is (he thought to himself) the most hopeless. Everything might favour the project which would make a man's friends happy, and satisfy all their aspirations for him; when, lo! a causeless caprice, a foolish dislike, would balk everything. It is true that he had for years resigned the hope of seeing Richard take his true place in the county, and show at once to the new men what the good old blood was worth, and to the old gentry that the Rosses were still their leaders, as they had been for generations; but this visit had brought a renewal of all the old visions. He had seen with a secret pride, of which, even to his wife, he had not breathed a word, his son assume with ease a social position above his brightest hopes. The county had not only received him, but followed him, admired him, listened to his opinions as those of an oracle. To bring him in for the county after this, and to carry his election by acclamation, would be child's-play, his father thought. But Richard did not see it. He was, or assumed to be, indifferent to the applause of "the county." He cared nothing for his own country, or for that blessedness of dwelling among his own people which Scripture itself has celebrated. No wonder that Lord Eskside should sigh. "I believe you think more of these fiddling play-acting foreigners," he said, after an interval of silence, during which his eyebrows and his under

lip had been in full activity, "than for all our traditions, and all the duties of your condition in life."

"Every man has his taste, sir," Richard answered, with a shrug of his shoulders, which irritated his father still more deeply.

"Well, you are old enough to judge for yourself," he said, getting up abruptly from the table. A great many things to say to his son had been in the old lord's mind. He had meant to expound to him his own view of the politics of the day, at home, to which naturally Richard had not paid much attention. He had meant to impress upon him the line the Rosses had always taken in questions exclusively Scotch. But all this was cut short by Richard's refusal even to consider the question. Being sad beforehand by reason of his son's departure, I leave you to imagine how melancholy-cross and disappointed Lord Eskside was now.

"What! is that imp still up?" he said, as going into the drawing-room he stumbled over his own best-beloved stick, upon which Val had been riding races round the room. "How dared you take my stick, sir? If you do that again you shall be whipped."

"You daren't whip me," cried saucy Valentine. "Grandma says I am never to be frightened no more—but I ain't frightened; and I'm to have what I want. Grandma! he is taking my stick away!"

"Your stick, ye little whipper-snapper! No; one generation succeeds another soon enough, but not so soon as that. Send the boy to his bed, my lady. He ought to have been there an hour ago."

"Just for this night," said Lady Eskside, as she caught the little rebel, and, holding him close in her arms, smoothed the ruffled curls on his forehead, and whispered in his ear that he was to be good, and not to make grandpa angry. "Just for this night—as his father is going away."

"Oh, his father!" said her husband, with a slight snort of irritation which showed Lady Eskside that the last evening had been little more satisfactory to him than to herself. Her own voice had faltered a little as she spoke of Richard's departure, and she looked at her son wistfully, with an incipient tear in the corner of her eye, hoping (though she might have known better) for some response; but Richard, as bland and gentle as ever, had seated himself by Mary, to whom he was talking, and altogether ignored his mother's

furtive appeal. Valentine gave her enough to do just at that moment to hold him, which, perhaps, was well for her ; and Lord Eskside walked away to the other end of the room, pretending to look at the books which were scattered about the tables, and whistling softly under his breath, which was one of his ways of showing irritation. Even Mary was agitated she scarcely knew why ; not on Richard's account, she said to herself, but as feeling the suppressed excitement in the house, the secret sense of disappointment and deep heart-dissatisfaction which was in those two old people, who had but little time before them to be happy in, and so wanted the sunshine of life all the more. Richard's visit had been a success in one sense. It had answered to their highest hopes, and more than answered ; but yet in more intimate concerns, in a still closer point of view, it had been a failure ; and of this the father and mother were all the more tremulously sensible that he showed so little consciousness of it—nay, no consciousness at all. He sat for a long time by Mary, talking to her of the most ordinary subjects, while his mother sat silent in her chair, and Lord Eskside, at the other end of the room, made-believe to look for something in the drawers of one of the great cabinets, opening and shutting them impatiently. Richard sat and talked quite calmly during these demonstrations, unaffected by them. He kissed his child coolly on the forehead, and bid him good-bye, with something like a sentiment of internal gratitude to be rid of the little plague, who rather repelled than attracted him. Mary went to her room shortly after Valentine's removal, which was effected with some difficulty, pleading a headache, and in reality unable to bear longer the painful atmosphere of family constraint—Lady Eskside's half-appealing, half-affronted looks, and anxious consciousness of every movement her son made, and the old lord's irritation, which was more demonstrative. Then the three who were left gathered together round the fire, and some commonplace conversation—conversation studiously kept on the level of commonplace—ensued. Richard was to start early next morning, and proposed to take leave of his mother that night—"not to disturb her at such an unearthly hour," he said. "Did you ever leave the house at any hour when I did not make you your breakfast and see you away ?" Lady Eskside asked, with a thrill of pain in her voice. And as she left the room, she grasped his hand, and looked wist-

fully in his face, while he stooped to kiss her. “Richard,” she said in a half whisper, as the two faces approached close to each other, “for myself I do not ask anything—but, oh, mind, your father is an old man! Please him if you can.”

Lord Eskside was leaning upon the mantelpiece, gazing into the fire. He continued the same commonplace strain of talk when his son came back to him. How badly the trains corresponded; how hard it would be, without waiting at cross stations and losing much time, to accomplish the journey. “And as you have to make so early a start you should go to your bed soon, my boy,” he said, and held out his hand; then grasping his son’s, as his wife had done, added hastily, his eyebrows working up and down—“What I have been saying to you, Richard, may look less important to you than it does to me; but if you would make an effort to please your mother! She’s been a good mother to you; and neither I nor anything in the world can give her the pleasure that you could. Good night. I shall see you in the morning;” and Lord Eskside took up his candle and hurried away.

The effect of this double appeal, so pathetically repeated, was not, I fear, all that it should have been. When he reached his own room, Richard yawned, and stretching his arms above his head—“Thank heaven! I shall be out of this to-morrow,” he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

I HAVE now to change the scene and bring before the notice of the reader another group, representing another side of the picture, with interests still more opposite to those of Lord Eskside and his heir-apparent than were, even, the interests of that heir-apparent’s mother. But to exhibit this other side, I have fortunately no need to descend to the lower levels of society, to Jean Macfarlane’s disreputable tavern, or any haunt of doubtful people. On the contrary, I know no region of more unblemished respectability or higher character than Moray Place in Edinburgh, which is the spot I wish to indicate. Strangers and tourists do not know much of

Moray Place. To them—and great is their good-fortune—Edinburgh means the noble crowned ridge of the Old Town, fading off misty and mysterious into the wooded valley beneath ; the great crags of the castle rising into mid-sky, and the beautiful background of hills. Upon this they gaze from the plateau of Princes Street ; and far might they wander without seeing anything half so fine as that storied height, lying grey in sunshine, or twinkling with multitudinous lights, as the blue poetic twilight steals over the Old Town. But on the other side of that middle ground of Princes Street lies a New Town, over which our grandfathers rejoiced greatly as men rejoice over the works of their own hands, despite the fullest acknowledgment of the work of their ancestors. There lie crescents, squares, and places, following the downward sweep of the hill, with, it is true, no despicable landscape to survey (chiefly from the back windows), yet shutting themselves out with surprising complacency from all that distinguishes Edinburgh amid the other cities of the world. Nobody can say that we of the Scots nation are not proud of our metropolis ; but this is how our fathers and grandfathers—acute humorous souls as most of them were, with a large spice of romance in them, and of much more distinctly marked individual character than we possess in our day—asserted the fundamental indifference of human nature, in the long-run, to natural beauty. How comfortable, how commodious are those huge solid houses !—houses built for men to be warm in, to feast in, and gather their friends about them, but not with any æsthetical meaning. Of all these streets, and squares, and crescents, Moray Place perhaps is the most “palatial,” or was, at least, at the period of which I speak. Personally, I confess that it makes a very peculiar impression on me. Years ago, so many that I dare not count them, there appeared in the pages of ‘Blackwood’ a weird and terrible story called the “Iron Shroud,” in which the feelings of an unhappy criminal shut up in an iron cell (I think, to make the horror greater, of his own invention) which by some infernal contrivance diminished every day, window after window disappearing before the wretch’s eyes, until at last the horrible prison fell upon him and became at once his grave and his shroud — were depicted with vivid power. This thrilling tale always returns to my mind when I stand within the grand and gloomy enclosure of Moray Place. It

seems to me that the walls quiver and draw closer even while I look at them ; and if the circle were gradually to lessen, one window disappearing after another, and the whole approaching slowly, fatally towards the centre, I should not be surprised. But in Edinburgh, Moray Place is, or was, considered a noble circus of houses, and nobody feels afraid to live in it. I suppose as it has now stood so long, it will never crash together, and descend on the head of some breathless wretch in the garden which forms its centre ; but a superstitious dread of this catastrophe, I own, would haunt me if I were rich enough to be able to live in Moray Place.

Mr Alexander Pringle, however, never once thought of this when he established his tabernacle there. This gentleman was an advocate, to use the Scotch term—the cosmopolitan and universal term, instead of the utterly conventional and unmeaning appellation of barrister common to the English alone—at the Scotch bar. His father before him had been a W.S., or Writer to the Signet—a title of which I confess myself unable to explain the exact formal meaning. How these comparatively unimportant people came to be the heirs-at-law, failing the Rosses, of the barony of Eskside, I need not tell. Pringle is a name which bears no distinction in its mere sound like Howard or Seymour ; but notwithstanding, it is what is called in Scotland “a good name ;” and this branch of the Pringles were direct descendants from one of the Eskside barons. When Dick Ross’s misfortunes happened, and his wife forsook him, Mr Alexander Pringle, then himself recently married, producing heirs at a rate which would have frightened any political economist, and possessing a wife far too virtuous ever to think of running away from him, became all at once a person of consequence. He felt it himself more than any one, yet all society (especially in Moray Place) had felt it. By this time he had a very pretty little family, seven boys and one girl, all healthy, vigorous, and showing every appearance of long and prosperous life.

Fear not, dear reader ! I do not mean to follow in this history the fortunes of Sandy, Willie, Jamie, Val, Bob, Tom, and Ben. They were excellent fellows, and eventually received an admirable education at the Edinburgh Academy ; but I dare not enter upon the chronicle of such a race of giants. Val was born about the time that Richard Ross’s children disappeared, and the Pringles christened the baby

Valentine Ross, feeling that this might be a comfort to the old lord, whose "name-son" had thus mysteriously disappeared. Mr Pringle spoke of the event as an "inscrutable dispensation," and lamented his cousin's strange misfortunes to everybody he encountered. But dreadful as the misfortune was, it made him several inches higher, and threw a wavering and uncertain glimmer of possible fortune to come over the unconscious heads of Sandy, Willie, Val, and the rest. They cared very little, but their father cared much, and was very wide awake, and constantly on the watch for every new event that might happen on Eskside. The seven years of quiet, during which nothing was heard of Richard's children, ripened his hopes to such an extent that he almost felt himself the next in succession; for a mild *dilettante* like Dick Ross, who always lived abroad, did not seem an obstacle worth counting. Perhaps he was in consequence a little less careful of his practice at the bar; for this tantalising shadow of a coronet had an effect upon his being which was scarcely justified by the circumstances. But at all events, though they managed to keep up their establishment in Moray Place, and to give the boys a good education, the Pringles did not advance in prosperity and comfort as they ought to have done, considering how well-connected they were, and the "good abilities" of the head of the house. Though he would sometimes foolishly show a disregard for the punctilios of the law in his own person, and was now and then outwitted in an argument, yet Mr Pringle was understood to be an excellent lawyer; and he had a certain gift of lucidity in stating an argument which found him favour alike in the eyes of clients and of judges. Had he been a little more energetic, probably he would have already begun to run the course of legal preferment in Scotland. He was Sheriff of the county in which his little property lay; and at one time no man had a better chance of rising to the rank of Solicitor-General or even Lord Advocate, and of finally settling as Lord Pringle or Lord Dalrulzian (the name of his property) upon the judicial bench. But his progress was arrested by this shadow of a possible promotion with which his profession would have nothing to do. Lord Dalrulzian might be a sufficiently delightful title if no more substantial dignity was to be had, but Lord Eskside was higher; and the man's imagination went off wildly after the hereditary barony, leaving the reward of legal eminence far in the back-

ground. Gradually he had built himself up with the thought of this advancement ; and though they were by no means rich enough to afford it, nothing but his wife's persistent holding back would have kept him from sending Sandy, his eldest boy, to Eton, by way of preparing him for his possible dignity. For the days when boys were sent from far and near to the High School of Edinburgh are over ; and it is now the Scottish parent's pride to make English schoolboys of his sons, and to eliminate from the speech of his daughters all trace of their native accent. Mrs Pringle, however, was prudent enough to withstand her husband's desire. "What would he do at Eton ?" she said. "Learn English ? If he's not content with the English you and I speak, it's a pity ; and as for manners, he behaves himself very well in company as it is, and you'll never convince me that ill-mannered louts will be made into gentlemen by a year or two at a public school. You may send him if you like, Alexander—you're the master—but you will get no countenance from me." When a well-conditioned husband is told that he is the master there is an end of him. Mr Pringle was not made of hard enough material to resist so strong an opposition ; and then it would have cost a great deal of money. "Well, my dear, we'll talk it over another time," he said, and put off the final decision indefinitely ; which was a virtual giving in without the necessity of acknowledging defeat.

After all this gradually growing satisfaction and confidence in his own prospects, it is almost impossible to describe the tremendous effect which the news of Richard's return, and of the strange events which had taken place at Rossraig, had upon the presumptive heir. He spoke not a word to any one for the first two days, but went about his business moodily, like a man under the shadow of some deadly cloud. The first shock was terrible, and scarcely less terrible was the excitement with which he listened to every rumour that reached him, piecing the bits of news together. For a week he neglected his business ; forsook, except when his attendance was compulsory, the Parliament House ; and, if he could have had his will, would have done nothing all day but discuss the astounding tale, which at first he declared to be entire fiction, a made-up story, and pretended to laugh at. He hung about his dressing-room door in the morning, while his wife finished her toilet, talking of it through the doorway ; he hovered round the breakfast-

table, after he had finished his meal, neglecting his 'Scotsman'; he was continually appearing in the drawing-room when Mrs Pringle did not want him, and "deaved her," as she said, with this eternal subject. To no one else could he speak with freedom; but this sweet privilege of wifehood, instead of being an unmixed good, often becomes, in the imperfection of all created things, a bore to the happy being who is thus elevated into the ideal position of her spouse's *alter ego*. Mrs Pringle was not sentimental, and she soon got heartily sick of the subject. She would have cheerfully sold, at any time, for a new dinner dress—a thing she was pretty generally in want of—all her chances, which she had no faith in, of ever becoming Lady Eskside.

"Don't you think, Alexander," she said, having been driven beyond endurance by his rejection of a proposed match at golf on Musselburgh Links—a thing which proved the profound gravity of the crisis,—“don't you think that the best thing you could do would be to take the coach and go out to Lasswade, and inquire for yourself? Take Violet with you—a little fresh air would do her good; and if you were to talk this over with somebody who knows about it, instead of with me, that know nothing more than yourself——”

“Go—to Lasswade!” said Mr Pringle—“that is a step that never occurred to me. No; I have not been invited to Rossraig to meet Dick, and it would look very strange if I were to go where nobody is wanting me. If you think, indeed, that Vi would be better for a little change—— But no; Lord Eskside would not like it—there would be an undignified look about it—an underhand look; still, if you think an expedition would be good for Vi——”

It was thus that under pressure of personal anxiety a man mandered and hesitated who could give very sound advice to his clients, and could speak very much to the purpose before the Lords of Session. Mrs Pringle knew all this, and did not despise her husband. She felt that she herself was wiser in their own practical concerns than he was, but gave him full credit for all his other advantages, and for that ability in his profession which did not always make itself apparent at home. And she had a great many things to do on this particular afternoon, and was driven nearly out of her senses, she allowed afterwards, by this eternal discussion about Dick Ross's children and the succession to Eskside.

"Do you remember," she said, exercising her ingenuity, with as little waste of words as possible—for the mother of seven sons, not to speak of one little daughter besides, who is not rich enough to keep a great many servants, has not much time to waste in talk—"that little cottage at the Hewan, which I was always so fond of? The children are fond of it too. As you are off your match, and have the afternoon to spare, go away down and see if the Hewan is let, and whether we can have it for the summer."

"But, my dear, it is not half big enough for us," Mr Pringle began.

His wife turned upon him a momentary look of impatience. "What does it matter whether it's big or little, when you want to see what is going on?" she said. "Take the child with you, and ask about it. It would be fine to have such a place, to send Vi when the heat gets too much for her." These last words were spoken in perfect good faith, for people in Edinburgh keep up a fiction of believing that the heat is too much for them—as if they were in London or Paris, or anywhere else, where people love a yearly change.

"So it would," said Mr Pringle; "and you could go out yourself sometimes and spend a long day. It would do you good, my dear. I think I will go."

"Run and tell nurse to put on your best hat, Violet," said her mother; "and you may have your kid gloves, if you will be sure not to lose them. You are going out to the country with papa."

Little Violet rose from where she had been sitting, with a family of dolls round her, on the carpet. She had been giving her family their daily lessons, and felt it a very important duty. She was but six years old—one of those fair-haired little maidens who abound in Scotland, with hair of two shades of colour, much brighter in the half-curled locks which lay about her shoulders than on her head. With these light locks she had dark eyes, an unusual combination, and pretty infant features, scarcely formed yet into anything which gave promise of beauty. She was so light that Sandy, her big brother, could hold her up on his hand, to the admiration of all beholders. One daughter in such a family holds an ideal position, such as few girls achieve otherwise at so early an age. Their little sister was the very princess of all these boys. The big ones petted and spoiled her, the little ones believed in and reverenced her.

To the one she was something more dainty than any play-thing—a living doll, the prettiest ornament in the house, and the only one which could be handled without breaking wantonly, on purpose to have them punished, in their hands ; and to the others she was a small mother, quaintly unlike the big one, yet imposing upon them by her assumption of the maternal ways and authority. When she addressed the nursery audience with, “ Now you ‘ittle boys, mind what I say to you,” the babies acknowledged the shadow of authority, and felt that Vi wielded a visionary sceptre. She was very serious in her views of life, and held what might appear to some people exaggerated ideas as to the guilt of spilling your tea upon your frock, or tearing your pinafore ; and was apt to wonder where naughty little children who did such things expected to go to, with an unswerving and perfectly satisfied faith in everlasting retribution, such as would have edified the severest believer. Violet awarded these immense penalties to very trifling offences, not being as yet wise enough to discriminate or get her landscape into perspective. Her dolls were taught their duty in the most forcible way, and she herself carried out her tenets by punishing them severely when they displeased her. She got up from the midst of them now, and though she had been lecturing them solemnly a few minutes before, huddled them up, with legs and arms in every kind of contortion, into a corner which was appropriated to her. She walked up-stairs very gravely to be dressed, but made such a fuss about her kid gloves, that nurse, with two baby boys on her hands, was nearly driven to her wits’ end. On ordinary occasions, Vi wore little cotton gloves, with the tops of the fingers sewed inside in a little lump, which made her small hands (as they used to make mine) extremely uncomfortable. When she was fully equipped, she was a very trim little woman—not fine, but as imposing and dignified in her appearance as a lady of six can manage to be ; and when the anxious heir-at-law to the Eskside barony came down-stairs with her to start on this mission of inquiry, she was very particular that he should have his umbrella nicely rolled, and that his hat should be brushed to perfection. She liked her papa to be neat, as she was, and took, in short, a general charge of him, as of all the house.

This, dear reader, is the villain of this history, who is bent on spoiling, if he can, the hero’s prospects, and working con-

fusion in all the arrangements of the Eskside family, for the advantage of himself and his Sandy, the next heir, failing Richard Ross's problematical children. But on this particular day when he lifted his little girl into the coach, and made her comfortable, and smiled at her as she chatted to him, notwithstanding all his preoccupations, he was not a very bad villain. He would have liked to turn out to the streets the little beggar's brat of whom he had heard such incredible stories, and who was supposed to be likely to supplant in his lawful inheritance himself and his handsome boys ; but then he had never realised the individuality of this beggar's brat, while his heart was very much set upon his own children and their advantage—a state of mind not very uncommon. He was as good to little Violet as if he had been an example of all the virtues, and instead of feeling at all ashamed of so very small a companion, was as proud of her as if she had been a duchess. To see her brighten up as the coach rolled on through the green country roads distracted him for the first time from his all-absorbing anxiety ; and as they came in sight of the village of Lasswade, and he pointed out the river and the woods and the village houses to little Vi, he almost forgot all about the barony of Eskside. You would say that evil intentions could scarcely take very deep root in a heart so occupied ; but human nature is very subtle in its combinations, and it is curious how easily virtue can sometimes accommodate itself by the side of very ill neighbours. Mr Pringle had no idea or intention of working mischief, though mischief might no doubt arise by chance in his path. All that he wanted, so far as he was aware, was justice, and to make sure that there was no cuckoo's egg foisted into the nest at Eskside.

CHAPTER IX.

“OH, sir, no, sir,” said the smiling landlord at the Black Bull, where Mr Pringle went to have some luncheon and to order “a machine,” to take Vi and himself to the Hewan—the little cottage, which was the ostensible end of his mission

—“there’s different stories going about the country, but we must not believe all we hear. The real truth is, I’m assured by them that ought to know, that the little boy came over from foreign parts with his father, the Honourable Richard Ross, to be brought up as is befitting, in a decent-like house, and among folk that have some fear of God before their eyes,—which it’s no easy to find, so far as I can hear, abroad.”

“Came over with his father!” cried Mr Pringle, through whose soul this information smote like a sword. If this was the case, farewell to the beggar’s brat theory, and to all hope both for Sandy and himself.

“Well, that’s the most reasonable story,” said the landlord; “there’s plenty of other nonsense flying about the country. What we a’ heard at first was, that some gangrel body knockit loud and lang at the ha’ door the night of that awfu’ storm, and threw in a bundle, nigh knocking over auld Harding the butler; and when lights were got—for the lamp was blown out by the wind—it was found to be this boy. It’s an awfu’ age for sensation this, and that’s the sensational story, folk ca’ it. But Mr Richard, there can be nae doubt, has been home direct from Florence and Eitaly, and what so likely as that he should bring the bairn himsel’? So far as I can learn, a’body that is anybody, so to speak, the gentry and them that ought to ken, believes he came with his father. The servants and folk about the town uphold the other story; but you ken, sir, the kind of story that pleases common folk best? Aye something wonderful; fancy afore reason.”

“But surely it is very easy to get to the bottom of it,” said Mr Pringle, with a beating heart. “Was the child with Mr Ross, for instance, when he arrived?”

“Na, I never heard that,” said the landlord, swaying over to the other side. “The carriage passed by our windows. So far as I could see, there was but himself inside, and his man on the box. We maunna inquire too close into details, sir—especially you that are a relation of the family.”

“That is exactly why it is so important I should know.”

“Well-a-well, sir! they do say, I allow,” said the man, sinking his voice, “that the little laddie was here before his father; that’s rather my own opinion—no that I ever saw him. They sent down here, about a week before Mr Ross came home, to inquire about a woman and a wean; nae

woman or wean had been here. There was one I heard, at Jean Macfarlane's on the other side of the bridge, which is a place no decent person can be expected to ken about."

"And who was the woman?" said Mr Pringle, with breathless interest.

"Na, that's mair than I can tell. Some say a randy wife that's been seen of late about the country-side; some says one thing and some another. Auld Simon the postman and Merran Miller were twa I'm told that saw her; but this is a' hearsay—a' hearsay; I ken naething of my own knowledge. I must say, however," added the landlord, seriously, "that I blame themselves up at the big house for most of the stir. They sent down inquiring and inquiring, putting things into folk's heads about this woman and the wean. My lord had a' them that saw her up to the house, and put them through an examination. It was not a prudent thing to do—it was that, more than anything else, that made folk begin to talk."

"And was that before Richard Ross came home?"

"Oh ay, sir—oh ay; a good week before."

"At the time, in short, that the child came?" said Mr Pringle, with legal clearness.

"Well, Mr Pringle—about the time the bairn was said to have come, I'll no deny; but a'body that's best able to judge has warned me no to build my faith on a coincidence like that. Maist likely it was nothing more than a co-inn-cidence. They're queer things, as you that are a lawyer must know."

"Yes, they are queer things," said Mr Pringle, with a flicker of hope; and then he changed the conversation, and began to inquire about the Hewan, and whether it was let for the season, or if any one had been in treaty for it. "My wife has a fancy for the place. She knew it when she was young," he said, half apologetically.

"But it's a wee bit box of a place—no fit for your fine family. It would bring the roses, though, into little Miss's cheeks, for the air's grand up on that braehead."

"It is just for her we want it," Mr Pringle said, with an unusual openness of confidence. "She is rather pale. Come, Vi, there is the gig at the door."

Vi walked down-stairs very demurely and got into the gig, trying to look as if she mounted with some dignified difficulty, and not to clamber up with the speed and sureness which her breeding among so many boys had taught her.

She had been listening, though she took no part in the talk. "Who is the little boy, papa?" she said, curiously, as they drove briskly along through the keen but sunshiny air.

"A little boy at Rossraig up yonder among the trees. Do you see the turrets, Vi?"

"Yes, I see them: are they made of gold? and is he a bad little boy, papa?"

"No, Vi; I don't suppose he means it, and you don't understand, my pet; but it would be very bad for Sandy and the rest if he were to stay there."

"Then, papa, if it will be bad for Sandy, and the little boy is naughty, why not drive up the avenue and take him and carry him away somewhere where he can do no harm?"

This was Violet's incisive way of dealing with difficulties. She had all the instincts of a grand inquisitor: and would have acted with the same benevolent absorption in the grand object of doing good to her patient whether he liked it or no. The pair drove at a spanking pace up the pretty road among the budding trees, through which at intervals there were glimpses of Esk brawling over his boulders, his brown impetuous stream all flecked with foam, like a horse in full career. A sensation of positive happiness was in Mr Pringle's mind as he drove along the familiar road through the country which he hoped might yet acknowledge his influence and authority. He could not have kidnapped the little offender as Violet suggested; but he was glad to think that there was every chance he was an impostor, and the field clear for himself and his heir. A lawsuit rose up before him in fullest dramatic detail, a kind of thing very attractive to his professional imagination. He saw how much more difficult it would be on the other side to prove the right of this supposititious heir, than it would be on his to throw doubt upon him. I do not think the thought ever crossed his mind that the child might not be supposititious at all, but the real grandson of Lord Eskside. It is so much easier when you are deeply interested in a subject to see your own side of the question, and to believe that yours is the side of right. In his sense of the possibilities of the case his spirits rose, and he enjoyed his drive to the Hewan with his innocent little girl beside him. Up they went, mounting the long slope, now letting the horse walk at the steep parts, now urging him to a momentary spurt, now rolling rapidly along on a shady level, with the branches almost meeting over

head. The day was warm for April, yet the wind was fresh and chilly, and blew in their faces with a keen and sweet freshness which brought the colour to little Violet's cheek. "Little Vi would change into Little Rose up here on Esk-side," said Violet's father—he had not felt so light of heart for many a day.

The Hewan is the tiniest of little cottages, perched high up on a bank of the Esk, and surveying for a mile or two the course of the picturesque little stream between its high wooded banks, with here and there a pretty house shining far off among the trees, on some little plateau of greensward, and the sound of the river filling the air with a soft rustling and tinkling. Alas ! there are paper-mills now along the course of that romantic stream. I was but six years old, like Violet, when I first saw that wild little place, and ever since (how long a time !) it has remained in my mind, charming me with vague longings. Vi trotted to the grassy ridge and gazed down the course of the stream, and said nothing : for what can a child say, who has no phrases about the beautiful at her tongue's end, and can only stare and wonder, and recollect all her life after, that brawling, surging river, those high trees, inclining from either bank towards each other, and that ineffable roof of sky ? The old woman who kept the cottage consented that it was still unlet, and threw no difficulties in the way ; and Mr Pringle secured it there and then for the summer. "I should like to buy it," he said to himself, "if it were not—" If it were not ?—that perhaps the turrets within sight might one day be his—a castle of dreams. The idea of the great possibilities before him suddenly surged upwards, flooding his soul ; and then a hunger seized him for the river, and the woods, and the fair country which they threaded through. He wanted to have them, to possess them—not the rent of them, or the wealth of them, but themselves—a passion of acquisition which is something like love, swelling suddenly in his heart. He forgot himself gazing at them, till Vi roused him, plucking at his coat, "Papa, it is bonnie ; but why do you look and look, with your eyes so big and strange, like the wolf that ate little Red Riding Hood ? "

"Am I like a wolf ?" he said, half laughing, yet tremulous in his momentary passion, seizing the child in his arms, and lifting her up to share his view. "Look, Vi ! perhaps some day all that may be yours and mine."

Violet looked gravely as a duty; but there was something in his strenuous grasp that frightened her, and she struggled to be put down. "I do not think," she said, with precocious philosophy, "that it would be any bonnier if it was yours, papa—or even mine."

Mr Pringle was tremulous after this burst of unusual emotion, for what has a respectable middle-aged lawyer to do with passion either of one kind or another? The fit went off, and he felt slightly ashamed of himself; but the thrill and flutter of feeling did not go off for some time. He sent the gig and horse to meet him at the Eskside gates, and taking Vi's hand in his, went down by a pathway through the woods to a side entrance. "Perhaps we shall see this little boy we were talking of," he said; but he was far from having made up his mind to confront the two old people, my lord and my lady, who would see through his pretences, as people are clever to see through the guiles of their heirs. He was reluctant to face them boldly; but yet he was—how curious!—eager to look the present crisis in the face, and see for himself what he had to fear. After they had gone a little way along the woodland path, which was still high above the course of the stream, though accompanied all the way by the sound of its waters as by a song, Violet escaped from her father's hand, and ran on in advance, making excursions of her own, hither and thither, darting about in her brown coat and scarlet ribbons like a robin-redbreast under the budding branches. Mr Pringle, lost in his own thoughts, let her stray before him, expecting no encounter. Presently, however, there came from Vi a little cry of surprise and excitement, which quickened his steps. He hurried on after her, and came to an opening in the trees where the path widened out. It was a small circular platform, open to the slope of the river-bank, and with a rustic seat placed in an excavation on the higher side of the way. Into this open space another little figure had rushed from the other side, panting and flushed, grasping a tall stick, and stood, suddenly arrested, in front of Violet, facing her, with an answering cry, with big brown eyes expanded to twice their natural size, and a face suddenly filled with curiosity and wonder. Mr Pringle it may be supposed was *blasé* in the matter of boys, and I do not think that the affectionate father of an honest plain family is ever a great amateur of childish beauty. This little figure, however, in his fantastic velvet dress, with his hat

perched on the back of his head, and all his dark curls ruffled back from his bold brown forehead, struck him with a certain keen perception of beauty which was almost pain. Ah! and with a perception of something else which was still sharper pain. He fell back a step to recollect himself, staggered by the sudden impression. What made the child so like Richard Ross? What malignant freak of fortune had so amalgamated with the dark complexion and look which was not Richard's, those family features? Mr Pringle stood as if spell-bound, contemplating the child about whom he had been so curious, about whom his curiosity was so fatally satisfied now.

"You are the little boy that lives at Rossraig," said Violet, feeling the responsibility of a first address to lie with her, but somewhat frightened, with tremblings in her voice.

"Yes; and who are you?" cried the little fellow. Mr Pringle behind noticed with a pang that he spoke with an "English accent," that advantage which the ambitious Scotch parent so highly estimates. This gave him a still deeper pang than the resemblance, for it seemed to give the final blow to the beggar's brat theory. Beggar's brats in Mr Pringle's experience spoke Scotch.

"Who are you?" said Val. "I never saw you before. Will you come and play? It's dull here, with no one to play with. Do you hear any one coming? I've run away from grandpapa."

"But you oughtn't to run away from your grandpapa," said Violet. "It is very naughty to run away, especially when the other people can't run so fast as you."

"That's the fun," cried the other, with a laugh. "If you'll come and play, I'll show you squirrels and heaps of things. But help me first to hide this big stick. I think I hear him coming—quick, quick!"

"Would he beat you with it?" said Vi, growing pale with terror.

"Quick, quick!" cried the boy, seizing her by the wrist; but just then there was a rush of steps along the sloping path which wound down the brae to this centre, and Lord Eskside himself appeared, half angry, half laughing, pulling aside the branches to look through. "Give me back my stick, you rogue!" he cried, then paused, arrested, as Mr Pringle had been, by that pretty woodland picture. It was

something between a Watteau group, and the ruder common rendering of the "Babes in the Wood :" the girl in her scarlet ribbons with liquid dark eyes uplifted, her face somewhat pale, with mingled terror, and self-control ; the boy, all flushed and beautiful in his cavalier dress, grasping her by the wrist ; with the faintly green branches meeting over their heads, and the brown harmonious woods, all musical with evening notes of birds and echoes of the running water, for a background. The men on either side were so impressed by the picture that they paused mutually, in involuntary admiration. But they had both perceived each other, and though their sentiments were not very friendly, politeness commanded that they should speak.

"I hope you are well, Lord Eskside," said Mr Pringle, stepping with an effort into the charmed circle. "I had just brought my little girl through the woods to see how beautiful they are. This is my Violet ; and this fine little fellow is—a visitor, I suppose ?"

"Is it you, Alexander Pringle ?" said Lord Eskside. "I could not believe my eyes. It is a sight for sore een to see you here."

"Indeed it is chance—mere chance," said Pringle, with a fulness of apology which he was himself uneasily conscious was quite uncalled for. "I have been up at the Hewan, which I have taken for the summer."

"The Hewan for the summer ! why, man, it's a mere cottage ; and what has become of your own place ?"

"Oh, I retain my old place ; but it is a long way off, and best for the autumn, when we can flit altogether. My wife is fond of the Hewan, though it is so small ; and we thought it would be handy to run out for a day, now and then. In short, it suits us. Does this little fellow, Lord Eskside, belong to the place ? or is he a visitor ? He seems to have struck up a sudden friendship with my little girl."

"A visitor !" said Lord Eskside. "Do you mean to say you have not heard—do you see no likeness in him ? This is my grandson, Pringle—my successor one day, I hope—Richard's eldest son."

"Richard's son !—you are joking," said Mr Pringle, growing pale, but with a smile that hurt him,—"you are joking, Lord Eskside ; a child of that complexion Richard's son !"

Lord Eskside felt that his adversary had hit the blot—and, to tell the truth, he himself had never perceived Val's

resemblance to Richard. "Colouring is not everything," he said; "I suppose he has his complexion from his mother;" then with a return blow,—"but I cannot expect you to be very much delighted with the sight of him, Pringle; he takes the wind out of your sails—yours and your boys'."

"I hope my boys will be able to manage for themselves," said Pringle, with a forced laugh. "If I say that I don't see the resemblance, it is for no such reason. I have never hungered for other folk's rights: but that is one thing and justice is another. Vi, my dear, we must go."

"What! won't you come and see my lady? She will be affronted if you pass so near without calling; and you see," said the old lord, with an effort at cordiality, "the children have made friends already. Come and have some dinner, man, before you go home. You know me of old. My bark is waur than my bite—I meant no harm."

"Oh, there is no offence," said the heir-at-law; "but it's getting late for a delicate child, and our gig is waiting at the Woodgate. Violet, you must bid the little man good-bye."

"He is not a naughty boy, papa, as you said—he is a nice boy," said Vi, looking up with an appeal in her eyes; "please, I should like to stay."

"And what made you think he was naughty, my bonnie little girl?" said Lord Eskside, in insinuating tones.

"Come, come, Violet, you must be obedient," said her father, hastily, shaking hands with his kinsman, whose old face, half grim, half humorous, was lighted up with sudden and keen enjoyment of the situation. Mr Pringle hurried his daughter on almost harshly in the confusion of his feelings. He had never been harsh to her before; and Violet, in her disappointment, took to crying quietly under her breath. "I should like to stay—I should like to stay!" she murmured; till out of pure exasperation the kindest of fathers could have whipped her, and thought of that operation as an actual relief to his feelings. Lord Eskside, on his part, stood still in the clearing, holding back Val, who was more vehement. "I want her to play with me; and you said I was to have whatever I wanted," the boy cried, struggling with all his might to break away.

"You must know, my man, that there are many things which we all want and cannot get," cried the old lord, holding him fast; and then he burst into a low laugh. "Here's

a bonnie state of affairs already," he said to himself: "Richard's son breaking bounds to be after Sandy Pringle's daughter! It's the best joke I've heard for many a day. Come, Val, come, like a good boy. We'll go and tell grandma. She may have a little girl in her pocket for anything you and I know."

"But I don't want any little girl; I want *that* little girl," cried Val, with precocious discrimination. The old lord chuckled more and more as he half led, half dragged him up the steep path towards the house.

"Man, if you're after them like this already, we'll have our hands full by the time you're of age!" But when he had said this, Lord Eskside paused and contemplated his grandson, and shook his head. "Can he be Richard's son after all?" the old man asked himself.

Lord Eskside, however, looked grim enough before he went into the house, where he betook himself at once to the drawing-room in which his wife sat alone, at a window overlooking the river. He went in to her moody, with the air of a man who has something to say.

"What is the matter?" said Lady Eskside.

"Oh, nothing's the matter. We're entering into the botherations I foresaw, that's all that's the matter. Who do you think I met in the woods but that lawyer-rascal Sandy Pringle, come to spy out the nakedness of the land!"

"And what nakedness is there to spy into? and what can Sandy Pringle do to you or me?" said the old lady, with a slight elevation of her head.

"Not much, perhaps, to you or me. He's taken the Hewan, Catherine, where he can lie in wait like an auld spider till he gets us into his net."

"I don't understand you," said the old lady, with the light of battle waking in her eyes. "What does it matter to us where Sandy Pringle lives? He has been out of the question, poor man, as everybody knows, since Providence sent to my son Richard his two bonnie boys."

"It's fine romancing," said Lord Eskside. "Where's the t'other of your bonnie boys, my lady? And where is your proof of this one that will satisfy a court of law? Likeness is all very well, and natural instinct's all very well, but they'll have little effect on the Court of Session. And though he's a haverel in private life, Sandy Pringle was always a clever lawyer. If you do not find the wooman

there will be a lawsuit, that will leave Eskside but an empty title, and melt all the lands away."

"We'll find the woman," said the old lady, clasping her fine nervous hands. "I'll move earth and heaven before I'll let anything come in my boy's way."

At this moment Val burst in, rosy and excited, with his grandfather's stick, which in the vehemence of their new ideas both the child and the old man had forgotten. "Grandma, I want that little girl to play with. Send over directly," cried Val, in hot impatience, "to get me the little girl!"

"You have enough on your hands, my lady," said Lord Eskside.

CHAPTER X.

THE Hewan was not a cottage of gentility. It was too small, too homely, too much like a growth of the soil, to belong to any class that could be described as *ornée*. The roof indeed was not thatched, but it was of red tiles, so overgrown with lichens as almost to resemble a thatch, except in the rich colour, which, to tell the truth, very few people appreciated. Its present owner was a shopkeeper in Lasswade, in whose heart there were many searchings about the vulgarity of its appearance, which he felt sure was the reason why it was not more easily let for the summer ; and this good man had almost made up his mind to the expense required for a good slate roof, when Mr Pringle fortunately appeared and engaged it "as it was." A sort of earthen embankment, low and thick, encircled the little platform on which it stood. There was nothing behind it but sky, with a light embroidery of trees ; for it occupied the highest "brae head" in the neighbourhood, and in a more level country would have been described as situated on the top of a hill. Before it lay the whole course of the Esk, not all visible indeed, narrowing here and there between high banks, now and then hiding itself under the foliage, or capriciously turning a corner out of sight,—but always lending to the landscape that charm of life which water more than anything imparts to the inanimate world around. Cliffs and trees, and bits of

bold brown bank, and soft stretches of greensward, all took a certain significance, and explained their *raison d'être* by the river. The houses, too, from the dignified roofs of Ross-craig lower down the stream, showing their turrets, which little Violet supposed to be made of gold, between the clouds of trees—down to the square white houses of the paper-mill people on the other side, and here and there rough red tiles of a cottage of earlier date—were all harmonised by the river, which was the link which held them together. The usual geographical indications on Eskside were not by the points of the compass, as is so common in Scotland, but by the stream—“up the water” or “down the water” was the popular indication ; and a more picturesque one it would be difficult to find.

The Hewan was a long way up the water from Lasswade, yet not so far but that many a visitor would climb the brae to “get their tea” with old Mrs Moffatt, who was the mother of the proprietor,—living in charge of the house, and not too proud to superintend the domestic arrangements of small families who hired it for the sumner. She had a little room with a “box-bed,” that mystery of discomfort and frowsiness, but which was neither frowsy nor uncomfortable in the hands of the brisk little old woman—which her son had built on to the back of the house for her, and in which she continued summer and winter, retiring herself there in dignified privacy when “a family” was in full possession. Mrs Moffatt’s little room, which had been made on purpose for her, had no communication with the cottage. She considered it a very dignified retirement for her old age. John Moffatt, her son, was a shoemaker in Lasswade ; and when the savings of his cobbling enabled him to buy the Hewan, and establish his mother there, no noble matron in a stately jointure-house was ever half so proud. Such a feeling indeed as pride, or even satisfaction, rarely moves the mind of the dethroned queen who has to move out of the house she has swayed for years, and descend into obscurity when the humiliation of widowhood befalls her. Mrs Moffatt, good old soul, had no such past to look back upon. She had been long a widow, knocking about the world, doing whatever homely job she could find, struggling to bring up her children ; and the Hewan and the little back room represented a kind of earthly paradise to the cobbler’s mother. The summer lodgers who paid her for cooking and keeping in order their

little rooms, gave the frugal old soul enough to live on during the winter ; and when by chance “a family” came which had no need of her, good John, out of the abundance of the rent, allowed his mother the few weekly shillings she required. She had a little kitchen-garden to the back, surrounding her nest, as she called it, and kept a pig, which was her pride and joy, and a few chickens. If she could but have had a cow, the old woman would have been perfectly happy ; but as it is not, I suppose—or at least so people say—good for us to be perfectly happy, the cow was withheld from her list of mercies granted. Good little soul, her mouth watered sometimes when she thought of the butter she could make, and of the cheeriness of having “a neebor’s lassie” coming in with her pitcher for the milk, or even the luxury of a “wee drap real cream” in her cup of tea. But to mourn for unattainable things had never been her way ; and when she went “doon the toun” with a basketful of eggs for her daughter-in-law, she was as proud and happy in her homely gift as if it had been gold or diamonds. She was a friendly body everybody testified, and known up the water and down the water as always serviceable and always cheery. When there was any gossip going on of an interesting nature, some one in Lasswade or the neighbourhood always found opportunity of taking a walk up to the Hewan, and a cup of tea with old Jean, who was every one’s friend.

On such occasions Mrs Moffatt carefully skimmed every-thing that looked like cream from the milk which had been standing in a bowl for this purpose since the morning, and put on her little kettle, and took out her best china, and even prepared some “toasted breed” over and above the oat-cakes, which were her usual fare. The window of the old woman’s nest looked out upon a dark wilderness of trees, which descended down a steep bank to the upper Esk, and shut out any view. Her door was generally open, as well as the window, so that the rustling of the trees and the singing of the kettle kept pleasant company. Her boarded floor was as clean as soap and water could make it, and her hearth well swept and bright ; a huge rug, made by her own hands (for she was a capable old wife) out of strips of cloth of all colours, looked cosy before the fire. Her bed, like a berth in a ship, appeared behind, with a very bright bit of chintz for curtains, and covered with a gay patchwork

quilt. She had some brilliantly-coloured pictures on the walls—a wonderful little boy with big eyes and a curly dog, and a little girl with long curls and a doll, not more staring and open-eyed than herself. The old lady thought they were like “our wee Johnnie and Phemie down the town,” and found them “grand company.” She had some brass candlesticks and a glorious tea-caddy on the mantelpiece, and such a tea-tray set up against the wall as would have made all other ornamentation pale. “The worst o’t is, ye maun be awfu’ solitary, especially in the winter time, when there’s naebody ben the house, and few on the road that can help it,” her friends would say. “Me solitary!” said old Jean. “I’m thankful to my Maker I never was ane that was lanesome. I’m fond o’ company, real fond o’ company—but for a while now and then it’s no’ that ill to have your ain thoughts. And then there’s the hens, poor things, aye canty and neighbour-like, troubling their heads about their sma’ families, just as I used to do mysel’—and Grumphy yonder’s just a great diversion; and when it’s a cauld night, and I shut to the door, there’s the fire aye stirring and birring, and the wee nest as warm as can be, and the auld clock, tick, tick, aye doing its duty, poor thing, though it might be tired this hunder year or twa it’s been at it; and there’s a hantle reading in the ‘Courant,’ though maybe the ‘Scotsman’s’ bigger, and I’m on the Leeberal side mysel’. Toots! solitary! there’s naebody less solitary than me.”

A cheerful soul is always a social centre, however humble it may be. Jean’s friends accordingly went to see her, not out of pity, as to cheer a poor solitary old woman, but for their own amusement, which in this kind of social duty is by far the strongest motive. She was about the best-informed woman on all Eskside. Every kind of gossip made its way to her; and I doubt whether the people in Rosscraig House themselves, knew so well all that had happened and all that everybody said on the night of little Valentine’s arrival. She heard a great deal even from Mrs Harding herself, the housekeeper, who could not resist the temptation of confiding a few details, not generally known, to her old friend’s keeping. For Jean was known to be a person in whom it was possible to repose confidence, not one that would betray the trust placed in her. Besides, Mrs Moffatt had become a person of importance since it was known in Rosscraig that

Mr Pringle had taken the Hewan for the season. Lady Eskside herself got out of her carriage one day as she passed, and went to pay the old woman a visit. She went into the cottage and complimented old Jean on the excellent order in which she kept it. "I hear it has been taken by a relation of ours—Mr Pringle," she said.

"I didna ken he was a relation of your leddyship's; but it's Mr Pringle sure enough. I was sure I kent the face—no doubt I've seen him coming or going about the House."

"He comes very seldom to see us," said Lady Eskside. "In fact, before my grandson was born he considered himself the heir—after my son, you know; and he has been dreadfully disappointed, poor man, since. Val, don't go too near the dyke!"

"And this is the heir, nae doubt, my lady?—eh, what a bonnie bairn! Nane that see him need ever ask the rank he's born to. He has the look of a bit little prince. And I wouldna say but he was fond of his own way whiles—"

"More than whiles, more than whiles," said the old lady, graciously; "he is just a handful. But Mr Pringle has a large family, if it's him. He will never find room for his bairns in this little bit of a place."

"It's chiefly for the wee Miss he had with him, my lady. She's delicate, they say; and if ever a man was wrapt up in a bairn—and her so delicate—"

"Dear me, I am sorry to hear it!" said Lady Eskside, whose sympathy was instantly aroused; "will it be anything the matter with the chest? I am always most afraid for the chest in children. Mr Pringle is a most excellent man. He has been a little disappointed and soured perhaps—but he is an excellent person. The air is sharp up here, Jean—too sharp for a delicate child. If she should want anything, cream or fresh milk in the morning, be sure you let me know. Cream is excellent for the lungs. I like it better than that oil that doctors give now—nasty-smelling stuff. But if there is anything the poor child should want, be sure you send to me."

Lady Eskside was an acute woman, but she was foolish in this particular. She caught her own healthy blooming grandchild on the edge of the low embankment, where he was hazarding his life in warm enjoyment of the risk, and gave him a kiss though he deserved a whipping, and said, "Poor

Sandy Pringle!" with the most genuine feeling. She went into Lord Eskside's library, when her drive was over, full of this information. "You need not alarm yourself about Sandy Pringle, poor man," she said; "he has taken the Hewan on account of his poor little girl who is delicate—her chest, I am afraid. If you remember, his mother died of consumption quite young. It's a terrible scourge when it's in a family. My heart is sore for him, poor man. When the child comes we must have her here, and see if anything can be done. Perhaps if they were to take it in time, and send her to Madeira or some of these mild places; there is always hope with a bairn."

"My word, my lady, but you go fast," said the old lord, with his little keen eyes twinkling under his shaggy eyebrows. But he did not convince her any more than she convinced him. And indeed, when the Pringle family began to appear about the woods, every member of the household at Rossraig, down to my lady's young footman, felt that curiosity of opposition in respect to them which is almost as eager as the curiosity of partisanship. Mrs Harding the housekeeper had for her part taken up Lord Eskside's view of the subject, and when she too made a visit to Jean Moffatt one evening of the early summer, her purpose was of a more sternly investigating order than that of Lady Eskside.

"How do you like the folk *ben the house*?" she said, as she sat at tea; the cake she had brought "in a present" was placed on the table in the place of honour, and the tea was "masking" before the fire. It was a soft evening in May. The door was open, but the fire was not disagreeable, and the sound of the Esk far down below the brae, and the rustling of the leaves close round the house, were softened by the air of spring into a pleasant murmur. The family "*ben the house*" being separated by a good Scotch stone wall from old Mrs Moffatt's nest, gave no sound of their neighbourhood, and nothing but that wild but soft cadence of the waters and the trees interrupted the homely domestic harmonies more closely at hand—the cheery little stir and *pétilllement* of the fire, the singing of the kettle, the purring of the cat, the ticking of the old clock. Mrs Harding combined an earnest desire for information with a very pleasant sense of the immediate comfort and ease which she was enjoying. My lord and my lady were "out to their dinner,"

and Harding himself had promised to daunder up to the Hewan in the gloaming and fetch his wife home. Being "out to her tea" was an unusual event in the housekeeper's responsible life, and the enjoyment it gave her was great. "Eh, how quiet and pleasant it is!" she added, almost with enthusiasm; "this is one of the days you can hear the grass growin': and to get away from a' the stew and bustle o' the dinner, the hot fire, and the smell o' the meat, and thaupies that let one thing burn, and another boil over. If I were to envy onybody in the world, I think, Jean Moffatt, it would be you."

"Hoots," said the old woman, with a pleasant consciousness that her lot was enviable; "when you and your man make up your mind to retire, my certy, ye'll be a hantle better off than the like o' me."

"And when will that be?" said Mrs Harding, with a sigh; "no as lang as *They* live, for they couldna do without my man an' me. But I was saying, how do you like the folk ben the house?"

"You shouldna let yourself be keepit in bondage," said Jean, with a touch of sarcasm; "when folk *maun* do without ye, they *can* do without ye—I've aye seen that. Oh, I like them real well. They come and they gang, and now it's a breakfast and now the bairns' dinner—nothing more—and aye a maid to serve them; so it suits me fine. The lads are stirring boys, and Missie's a darling. She makes me think upon one I lost, that was the sweetest o' a' my flock. Eh, if you could but keep a girlie like that aye the same, what a pleasure it would be in a house! But the bit things grow up and marry, and have weans of their own, and get to be just as careworn and wrinkled as *yourself*. I think whiles my Marg'ret, with ten of a family, and a man no better than he should be, is aulder than me."

"It's the course of nature," said Mrs Harding—"we maunna grumble; but I'm sure when I see a' that folk have to go through with their families, I'm thankful I have nane o' my ain. Ye ken your Mr Pringle sets up to be *our* heir! It's real ridiculous if it wasna provoking. I could laugh when I think o't. He must have been terrible cast down when Mr Richard brought hame his boy."

"But I thought it was a randy wife, not Mr Richard——"

"Whisht!" said the housekeeper; "we'll say no more about that. It's no' a story I pretend to understand, but I'm

rather thinking it was some Italian or other that Mr Richard sent with the bairn. Foreigners are strange cattle. And whether it was man or woman I wouldna say, for nobody saw them but my man, and he's confused about the story. But this is clear, it was Mr Richard sent the bairn hame ; and reason guid. You should have heard his man on Eetaly and thae places. You might as well sell your soul to Satan, and better too, for you would aye get something by the bargain—and there's no even *that* comfort out there. Ye canna but wonder at Providence that lets a' that play-acting and fiddling and breaking o' the Sabbath gang on, and takes nae mair heed than if a' thae reprobats were sober, decent, kirk-going folk like ourselves. But I'm thinking their time will come."

"Poor bodies ! I daur to say they ken nae better," said Jean. "It'll be by the mother's side that the Pringles and the Rosses count kin ?"

"Na, how could that be, when he thinks himsel' the heir ? When ye've ance lived in a high family, ye learn a heap of things. Titles never gang the way o' the spinning-wheel, nor land that's entailed, as they call it. It's lad comes after lad, and the lasses never counted. I canna say it's according to justice, but it's law, and there's nae mair to be said. This is the way of it, for my lady told me hersel' : A Ross married a Pringle that was an heiress two or three hunder years ago, and took his wife's name, which was a poor exchange, though I'm saying nothing against the name of Pringle ; my first place was with the Pringles of Whytfield, a real fine family. And now that a' the Rosses have died down to the present family, the Pringles have come uppermost. My lady herself was six or seven years married before Mr Richard was born. So ye see they've had the cup to their lips, as you may say, more than once. That's a thing I could not bide. I would rather be my man's wife, knowing I could be no better all my days, than expect to be my lady, and never win further ben."

"It's much the same in a' ranks o' life," said Jean. "There's my Marg'ret ; it's been her desire a' her days to get the house at the Loanhead, with a nice bit land, that would gang far to feed her family. She's had the promise o't for ten years back. Old John Thomson was to flit afore he died, but that fell through ; and when he died, they couldna refuse to let his son come in ; and then it was

reported through a' the parish that young John was to emigrate——”

“I’ve heard that,” said Mrs Harding; “and I aye give my advice against it: for nae man will ever succeed if he doesna work hard; and if he’ll work hard, he’ll do very well at hame.”

“Young John was to emigrate,” continued Mrs Moffatt; “and it was a’ settled about his roup, and Marg’ret was sure of getting in by the term; when what does he do but change his mind! I thought the poor lass would have broken her heart; and oh, the fecht she has with a’ theae bairns and a weirdless man. Then he had that awfu’ illness, and it was reported he was dying. My poor Marg’ret came to me the day he was prayed for in the kirk, with red een. ‘I’m doing naething but pray for him,’ she said; ‘for oh, if I didna pray for him to mend, I would wish him dead, mother; and what comfort could I have in onything that came to me after that?’ The man got weel,” said the old woman, with a sigh; “he’s as weel as you or me, and a hantle younger, and he canna make up his mind if he’ll go or bide. It’s awfu’ tantalising; and it happens in a’ classes of life. I’m real sorry for the poor gentleman, and I hope he doesna take it to heart like my Marg’ret, poor lass!”

“Ye mean well,” said Mrs Harding, half affronted; “but to pity the next heir is like grudging the Almighty’s mercies to us. Folk should learn to be content. I’m no’ saying for your Marg’ret; but Mr Pringle is as weel off as he has ony right to be, and why should he come spying upon my lord and my lady? Folk should learn to be content.”

“It’s awfu’ easy when it’s no’ your ain case,” said Jean; “an’ I suppose we’ve a’ as much or mair than we deserve; but that does not satisfy your wame when you’re hungry, nor your back when you’re eauld. The maister has never been out here since the first time. The leddy came once, a fine sensible woman, that looks weel after her family; but it’s Missie that’s the queen o’ the Hewan. As it’s such a fine night, and nane but bairns in the house, if you’ll come ben we’ll maybe see them. I’ll have to think o’ some supper for them, for theae lang laddies are just wolves for their supper. Or maybe you’ll first take another cup o’ tea?”

Mrs Harding declined this hospitable offer, and rose, taking her shawl and bonnet with her, for it was nearly the time, she remarked, when she “must be going.” The two

lingered outside to look at the hens, and especially that careful but premature mother who had begun to "sit," though the weather was still but moderately adapted for the fledglings; and then they made a momentary divergence to see "Grumphy," who was the pride of his mistress's heart. "I'll no' kill him till after harvest, and I'll warrant you there'll be no better meat between this and Edinburgh. Poor beast!" she said, with a mixture of the practical and sentimental, "he's a fine creature, and has a fine disposition; but it's what we a' must come to. And yonder's where I would keep the coo—if I had ane," she added with a sigh, pointing to a little paddock. The cow was to old Jean what the barony of Eskside was to Mr Pringle, and the house at the Loanhead to her daughter Marg'ret: but the old woman's lot was the easiest, in that the object of her desire was not almost within her longing grasp.

CHAPTER XI.

LORD and Lady Eskside, as the reader has seen, were not quite in accord about their grandson: or at least they took different views of the circumstances which attended his arrival. They took (perhaps) each the view which came naturally to man and woman in such a position of affairs. The old lord, although himself at length absolutely convinced that the boy was his son's child and his own heir, was deeply oppressed by the consciousness that though there was moral certainty of this fact, there was no legal proof. "Moral certainty's a grand thing," said Willie Maitland, the factor, a man who knew the Eskside affairs to the very depths, and from whom there were no secrets possible; but he spoke so doubtfully as to inflame the mind of my lady, who sat by listening to their talk with an impatience beyond words.

"A grand thing!" cried Lady Eskside; "it is simply everything: what would you have more? And who can judge in such a question but ourselves? my son, who must know best, and my old lord and myself, who are next nearest? What do the men mean by their dubious looks? What can you have more than certainty? Mr Maitland, with your

knowledge of the law, I would like you to answer me that."

"Well, madam, as my lord says," said Willie Maitland, who was old-fashioned in his manners, "there is legal proof wanted. It may be just a deficiency on our part—and indeed, according to the Scriptures themselves, law is a sign of moral deficiency—but everything has to be summered and wintered before the Lords of Session."

"And what have the Lords of Session to do with our boy?" said my lady, indignantly. "I hope we are not so doited but what we can take care of him ourselves."

"My dear Catherine, that is not the question."

"What is the question, I would like to know?" said Lady Eskside, flushing with the heat of argument. "Do I need the Lords of Session to tell me whose son my own bairn is? I think you are all taking leave of your senses with your formalities and your legal proof. Poor Alexander Pringle there, up the water, cannot bring his delicate little girlie to the country for change of air but you think he's plotting against Val. If this suspicion and distrust of every mortal is what your bonnie law brings, I'm thankful for my part that I know nothing about the law; and I wish everybody was of my mind."

Lord Eskside and his factor went out quite cowed from my lady's presence. They were half ashamed both of the law and themselves, and I think the visit which they made to the land which was being marked out for "feus" was necessary to get up their spirits. Lord Eskside was rather excited about these feus—allotments of land to be let for building, upon a kind of copyhold which secured a perpetual revenue in the shape of ground-rent to the proprietor: though he was a little disposed at the same time to alarm himself as to the persons who might come to live there, and perhaps bring Radical votes into the county, and corrupt a constituency still stanch, amid Scotland's many defections, to "the right side." This public anxiety was a relief to his mind from the private anxiety; for however public-spirited a man may be, and however profound his interest in politics, the biting of a little private trouble is more sharp and keen than that patriotic concern for his country which drives him wild with excitement over a contested election. Willie Maitland the factor—a man "very well connected," half a lawyer, half a farmer, and spoken of by every soul in the

parish and on the estate by his Christian name—was big and burly and easy-minded, and took things much more easily than his lord. “By the time there is any question of the succession,” he said, “the story will be clean forgotten. It will be many a year, I hope, before Richard succeeds, let alone the boy.”

“Ay, ay, that is very true,” said the old lord, knitting his brows; “it may be many a year; but it might be a question of days, Willie, for anything you and me can tell. Well, well; for the moment we can make nothing better of it; and here are the feus. Good morning, doctor! I hope you’re all well at the Manse. It is a fine day for a walk. We are going to take a look at Willie Maitland’s pet scheme here.”

“An excellent scheme,” said Dr Bruce, the parish minister, turning to accompany them, with all that sober pleasure in something new which moves the inhabitants of a tranquil rural district in favour of such gentle revolutions as do not affect their own habits or comforts; and the three gentlemen spent an agreeable half-hour pacing and measuring the allotments. While they were thus engaged, Lady Eskside drove past with Val on the coach-box, making believe to drive. “There is my lady with her boy,” said Lord Eskside, waving his hand to them as they passed; but he thought he saw an incredulous smile upon the face of the minister, which took away from him all pleasure in the feus.

My lady worked while my lord thus allowed himself to be overcast by every doubtful look. Strong in her moral certainty, she took every means which lay in her power to spread the same conviction far and wide; and as she worked very hard at this undertaking, she had a right to the success, which she enjoyed thoroughly. Her chief work, however, was with the child himself—the strange little unknown being unable to express all the wonderments that were in him at his change of lot, who was in her hands as wax in some respects, while in others she could make but little of him. Val had reconciled himself to the revolution in his fate with wonderful facility. He was so young, that after a few fits of violent weeping and crying for his mother and his brother, he had to all appearance forgotten them; and being indulged in every whim, and petted to the top of his bent, with abundant air, exercise, toys, and caresses, had so adapted himself to his new position as to look familiar and at ease in

it before many weeks had passed. What vague recollections and baby thoughts upon the subject might be in him, nobody knew ; but as childish recollections are in most cases carefully cultivated, and exist by means of constant reminders, I suppose Val, deprived of such aids, actually did forget much more readily than children usually do. Lady Eskside devoted herself specially to his polish and social education, to the amending of his manners and speech, and the imparting of those acts of politeness which are the special inheritance of small gentlemen : and she succeeded, to her own surprise, much more perfectly than she had hoped to do. Val took to the teaching in which no books nor perplexing printed symbols were involved, with perhaps a precocious sense of humour, but certainly a readiness of apprehension which filled my lady with joy. She taught him to bow, to open the door for her when she went out or in, to listen, and to reply ; and what was still more wonderful, to sit still when circumstances demanded that painful amount of self-restraint. "A little gentleman tries first of all to be pleasant to other people," said his instructress. "When you are out playing, you shall please yourself, Val, and everybody will help you to enjoy yourself ; but in company a gentleman always thinks of others, not of himself." And having well laid down this principle, my lady proceeded, with great minuteness, to details. She thought it was a certain sign of his gentle blood that he learned his social lesson with such quickness ; but I am inclined to believe that Valentine's success was owing much more surely to that latent dramatic power which exists in almost all children, and which they are so proud and happy to exercise on every possible occasion.

Certainly, whatever the cause was, the result was triumphant. When Val was alone—in the nursery, where he ruled like a little despot, or out of doors, where he conducted himself like a tiny desperado, always in mischief—he was uncontrollable ; but in the drawing-room, when his grandmother received her visitors, or when he accompanied her on the visits which it was now a point in her diplomacy to make, no little paladin born in the purple could have shown more perfect manners, or behaved himself more gracefully. He was acting a part, well defined and recognisable, and the *rôle* gave him pleasure. Not that the child himself was conscious of this, or could have defined what his instinct enabled him to do so perfectly ; but yet the mental exercise

was one that excited him, and called forth all his powers. The little actor threw himself off, as he jumped from the coach-box, where he had been driving wildly, with precocious dash and nerve, restrained, with difficulty, by the cautious old coachman, who knew exactly how much my lady could put up with—and assumed in a moment the gracious character of the little prince, suave, soft, and courteous, saying what he had to say with childish frankness, and keeping himself still and in order with a virtue which was heroic. From the Dowager Duchess to the farmers' wives on Eskside, everybody was satisfied by these performances ; and no reasonable creature who had seen Val's little exhibition could have lent a moment's credence to the vulgar story of the "randy wife." "I don't see the strong likeness to his father," said the Dowager Duchess, who was, as it were, the last court of appeal and highest tribunal of social judgment in the county. "To me there is another type of feature very evident besides the difference of complexion ; but in manuers he's his father's son. Not a lout, like Castleton's boy, who ought to be a gentleman, heaven knows ! if race is anything—on both sides of the house." Lady Eskside felt the implied sting about "both sides of the house," but bore it heroically, knowing that the Marquis of Hightowers, the Duke of Castleton's only son, was like any ploughman's child beside her own bonnie boy ; and it did not occur to her, any more than it did to Val himself, that the whole secret of his success was his superiority in dramatic power, and in enjoyment of that suppressed but exquisite joke of mystification which children by nature love so dearly. Probably it was the blood of gipsy and tramp and roadside mime in Val's veins which gave him more facility than usual in the representation ; but the same gift shows in every nursery in a greater or lesser degree. Little Violet Pringle, with her dolls around her, discoursing to them—scolding one for its naughtiness, and another for having neglected its lessons, with high maternal dignity—was not more purely histrionic than was Val when he played at being young prince and good boy, according to his grandmother's injunctions, and enjoyed the mystification—unless when it chanced to last too long.

"He is a strange child," said Lady Eskside to her favourite confidant Mary Percival, whose visits became more frequent and prolonged after this, and whose curiosity about

the boy, whom she was not fond of, gave a certain point of interest and almost excitement to the pleasure she had in seeing her old friend. "He is a strange boy. When he goes out with me, you should see, Mary, the gentleman he is. The politest manners—better than Richard's, for Richard was shy ; never too forward, nor taking too much upon him, but a smile and an answer for everybody ; and ready to open the door or hand you anything, as if he had been brought up to it all his life. But when he comes home, he is just a whirlwind, nothing else—what is the meaning of it ? I sometimes think the spirits of both the bairns have got together in one frame."

" You have heard nothing of the other ? "

" Nothing ; nor of *her*, which is hard to bear. I cannot say for my own part either, that I feel it so hard ; but I'm sorry for my old lord. I never saw him so full of fears and fancies. He thinks unless we can find her and the other boy, that Val's place in the world will never be sure. I tell him it's just nonsense. Who has anything to do with it but ourselves ? and who can be such judges as we are ? But he will not listen to me."

" I think Lord Eskside must be right," said Mary. " Lawsuits are terrible things, and bring great trouble. I know something about that."

" Lawsuits !" said Lady Eskside, with a laugh. " If Sandy Pringle has the assurance to bring a lawsuit, I think we could soon let him see his mistake. Besides, what could he bring a lawsuit about ? I don't think you show your usual sense, my dear. Because my lord and me have found our son's son, and have killed the fatted calf for our grand-bairn ? The fatted calf is ours, and not Sandy Pringle's. He could scarcely make a case of that."

" No, indeed," said Mary ; but she did not feel any security in Lady Eskside's triumphant argument. Val had been out on one of his expeditions with his grandmother, in which he had won all hearts, and now was in the wood making the air ring with shouts, and letting out the confined exuberance of his spirits in every kind of noise and mischief possible to a child of his age. " That's the boy," said Lady Eskside, leaning from the open window to listen. " You may be sure he is on the rampage, as Marg'ret Harding says." The smile upon the old lady's face went to Mary's heart ; there was the foolishness of love in it, as there was the foolishness

of triumphant security in her reasoning. She was not troubled by the problem of this little creature so strangely thrown upon her hands, nor even by the twofold life, which she wondered at. People do not analyse the characters of their children, but accept them—often with a mingling of wonder at their peculiarities, and frank unconsciousness of any cause for these peculiarities, which is very strange to the beholder. Lady Eskside took pride in Val's versatility, even while it occasioned her some delighted wonder ; but she did not trouble herself by any speculation as to the qualities that produced it, or the results to which it might lead.

Thus things went on for some years, and the country-side, as Willie Maitland predicted, partially forgot the story. The boy grew tall and strong, a favourite in society, and not unpopular among the rougher public of his own age and kind, who, indeed, were chiefly represented to Val by the Pringle boys. The Pringles continued to keep possession of the Hewan partly because the children liked it, partly because the father still cherished in his secret soul some hope of finding out the fraud which he believed was being perpetrated against his rights and his boy's ; and as the cottage was within easy reach of Edinburgh, some member of the family was almost always there. Sometimes it was the mother, with Violet and the little ones, —sometimes the boys alone, walking out in a dusty merry party, on a holiday, for any diversion that happened to be in season. They came for skating in winter, for fishing in spring and autumn ; for the Esk above the Hewan was sweet, and free from all poisonous paper-mills. And as they were undoubtedly relations, though in a very distant degree, it was not within the possibilities of Scotch politeness to refuse the boys some share of the shooting ; and it was in the company of Sandy and his stalwart brethren that young Val first fired a shot and missed a bird. Though Lord Eskside looked glum at the associations thus formed, and wondered more than ever what Sandy Pringle meant, it was impossible to keep his grandson from the company of the only boys within reach who were of his own class, or something approaching to it. He learnt all kinds of manly exercises from them or with them, and knew the way to the Hewan blindfold by night or day, as well as he knew the way to his own chamber—a result which the parents on either side were far from desiring, but seemed helpless to prevent.

One day in the early summer, when the boy was about twelve years old, he escaped, I don't know how, from the tutor who had been brought from Oxford for him, and whose life Val did his best to make a burden. He got away quite early in the morning, and escaped into the woods, with a double sense of pleasure in the thought that this holiday was surreptitious, the conquest of his bow and his spear rather than lawful leisure granted by lawful authority. Val had had no breakfast, but he did not mind—he was free. He went away into the thickest of the woods and climbed a tree, and lay there among the branches in a cradle of boughs which he had long since found out, looking up at the breaks of blue sky through the leaves in the fresh early morning, before anything was astir but the birds. Val was great in birds, like most country boys. He listened to the universal twitter about him, amusing himself by identifying every separate note, till he tired of this tranquil pleasure. Then he looked out from his lofty retreat to count how many different kinds of trees he could see from that leafy throne; and then for a few minutes he lay back with his face to the sky, and watched the white airy puffs of cloud which floated slowly across the blue, with a dreamy enjoyment. But such meditative pleasures could not last very long. It was true he had the delightful thought that he had played truant, and had a whole day to himself, to fall back upon when he was tired, and this was always refreshing. But after a while it weighed heavy upon Val that he had nothing to do, and presently even the satisfaction of having stolen a march upon Mr Grinder scarcely bulked so large in his mind as the want of breakfast, which he saw no easy way of obtaining up here among the leaves. He did not venture to go to a game-keeper's cottage for a share of the children's porridge, lest he should be led ignominiously back to Grinder and grammar. All at once a brilliant idea suggested itself—the Hewan! In a moment this notion was carried into practice; and Val, jumping down like a squirrel from his nest in the branches, stole up the brae under the deepest trees, through the ferns all wet with dew, to the little airy platform on which the sun was shining, where the windows had just been opened and the day begun. One little figure sat perched on the low earthen dyke looking down the course of the Esk over tower and tree, and showing from far like

a blue flower in her bright-coloured frock. "It's the flag," said Val at first to himself, as he toiled upward through the high ferns, keeping carefully away from the path; then he corrected this first notion, and said, "It's Sandy's cricket-cap;" and then he added to himself with animation, "It's Vi!"

It was Vi, grown older and a little bigger since the first time she came to the Hewan—a very stately, splendid, foolish, idle little person, full of laughter and gravity and baby fun and precocious wisdom. She was as fond of taking care of everybody as ever she had been, but she forgot herself oftener, being older, and was not perhaps quite so severe on peccadilloes as at six. She was a little alarmed when she saw the big thing struggling upward among the ferns, and wondered whether there might really be a bear or a wolf in the woods, as there used to be in ancient times. A lion it could not be, Violet reflected, for the weather was too cold in Scotland for lions. She did not like to run away, but she thanked Providence devoutly that none of "the children" were here, and wondered with a delightful thrill of excitement whether, if it should be a lion, it would do anything to her. Then there came a whistle which Violet knew, and looking down through the bushes with a pleasant sense of safety, she recognised the wayfarer. "Oh, is it you?" she cried, calling to him from the top of her fortress: "I thought it was a bear." "Ay, it's me. There are no bears nowadays. Who has come?" said Val, laconic and *sans cérémonie*, as is the use of children, as he panted upwards to the embankment, and putting his foot in a crevice swung himself up with the aid of a tree. "You will break your neck," said little Vi, with great gravity; "how can you do such things, you foolish boys!—nobody has come but me."

"Nobody but you!" said Val, with a whistle of surprise and half regret. Then he added with animation, "I'm awfully hungry; give us some breakfast, Vi. I have run off from Grinder, and I don't mean to go home till night. You can't think how jolly it is in the woods when there's nobody to stop you, and you have everything your own way."

"Oh, Val!" cried Violet, not knowing how to express the tumult of her feelings. She could not approve of such wickedness, but yet "playing truant" bore a glorious sound

about it. She had heard the words from fraternal lips, mingled with sighs of envy. Sandy and the rest had never gone so far as to play truant that she knew of ; but the words suggested endless rambles, woods and streams and wild flowers, and everything that stirs a child's imagination ; and it was the beginning of June when the woods are at their freshest, and Vi was all alone at the Hewan, hoping for nothing better than a story from old Jean Moffatt to beguile the endless summer day. Her eyes lighted up with excitement and curiosity. "Oh, Val ! if they find you, what will they do to you ?" she cried with awe ; "and where will you go, and what will you play at ?" she added, eager interest following close upon terror. There was not a soul visible about the Hewan in the morning sunshine. Old Jean had gone away to her own quarters on the other side of the house, after putting Violet's breakfast upon the table in the little parlour—and was busy with her beloved Grumphy, out of sight and hearing. The innocent doors and windows stood wide open ; the child, in her blue frock, musing on the dyke in childish dreaminess, had forgotten all about her breakfast. Absolute solitude, absolute stillness, infinitely more deep than that of the forest, which indeed was full of chatter and movement and inarticulate gay society, was about this silent sunny place. The bold brown boy, with his curls pushed off his forehead, his cheeks glowing, his dress stained with the moss and ferns and morning dew, and his young bosom panting with exertion, looked the very emblem of Adventure and outdoor enterprise—the young reiver born to carry peace and quiet away.

"I'm awfully hungry," was Val's only response. "Vi, have you had your breakfast ? I think I could eat you."

"To be sure I had forgotten my breakfast," said Violet, tranquilly ; "you are always so hungry, you boys. Come in, there's sure to be plenty for both of us ;" and she led the way in with a certain bustle of hospitality. There was a little coffee and a great deal of fresh milk on the table (for old Jean by this time had attained in a kind of vicarious way to the summit of earthly delight, and had, if not her own, yet Mrs Pringle's cow to care for, and made her butter, and dispensed the milk to the children with a lavish hand)—with two little bantam's eggs in a white napkin, and fresh scones, and fresh butter, and jam and marmalade in abundance. Val made a very rueful face at the bantam's eggs.

"Is that the kind of things girls eat?" he said; "they're only a mouthful. I should like a dozen."

"You may have one," said Vi, graciously. "It's my own little white bantam, and they're always saved for me; but if you're so hungry, I'll call Jean—or I'll go myself, and see what's in the larder—"

"That is best," said Val; "it's nice to be by ourselves, just you and me. Don't call Jean; she might tell the gamekeeper, and the gamekeeper would tell Harding, and somebody would be sent after me. You go to the larder, Vi; and I'll tell you when you come back what we'll do."

Violet ran, swift as her little feet could carry her, and came back laden with all the riches the larder contained, the chief article of which was a chicken-pie, old Mrs Moffatt's state dish, which had been prepared for the arrival of Mr and Mrs Pringle, who were expected in the afternoon. Vi either forgot, or did not know, the august purpose of this lordly dish: and when were there ever bounds to a child's hospitality when thus left free to entertain an unexpected visitor? She had some of the pie herself, neglecting her little eggs in compliment to Valentine, who plunged into it, so to speak, body and soul; and they made the heartiest of meals together, with a genuine enjoyment which might have filled an epicure with envy.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Val, with his mouth full; "we'll go away down by the water-side as far as the linn—were you ever as far as the linn? There's plenty of primroses there still, if you want them, and I might get you a bird's nest if you like, though the eggs are all over; and I'll take one of Sandy's rods, and perhaps we'll get some fish; and we can light a fire and roast potatoes: you can't think how jolly it will be—"

"We?" said Violet, her brown eyes all one glow of brilliant wonder and delight; "do you mean me too?"

"Of course I mean you too—you are the best of them all," said Val, enthusiastic after his pie; "you never sneak nor whinge, nor say you're tired, like other girls. Run and get your hat; two is far better fun than one—though it's very jolly," he added, not to elate her too much—"all by yourself among the woods. But stop a minute, let's think all we'll take; if we stay all day we'll get hungry, and you can't always catch fish when you want to. Where's a basket?—I think we'd better have the pie."

A cold shiver came over Violet as she asked herself what old Jean would say ; but the virtue of hospitality was too strong in her small bosom to permit any objection to her guest's proposal. "After all, it's papa's and mamma's, not old Jean's—it's not like stealing," Vi said to herself. So the pie was put into the basket, and some cheese from the larder, and some scones, and biscuits, and oatcake ; the jam Vi objected to, tidiness here outdoing even hospitality. "The jam always upsets, and there's a mess," she said, with a little *moue* of disgust, remembering past experiences ; therefore the jam was left behind. Valentine shouldered the basket manfully when all was packed. "You can bring it home full of flowers," he said—a suggestion which filled up the silent transport in Violet's mind. Had it really arrived to her, who was only a girl, nothing more, to "play truant" for a whole day in the woods ? the thought was almost too ecstatic—for you see Violet in all her little life had never done anything *very wicked* before, and her whole being thrilled with delightful expectation. Val put the basket down upon the dyke, pausing for one last deliberation upon all the circumstances before they made their start ; while Violet, scarcely able to fathom his great thoughts and advanced generalship, watched him eagerly, divining each word before he said it, with her glowing eyes.

"We shan't go by the road," said Val, meditatively, "for we might be seen. You don't mind the ferns being a little damp, do you, Vi ? If you hold the basket till I get down, I'll lift you over. But look here, haven't you got a cloak or something ? Run and fetch your cloak—look sharp ; I'll wait here till you come back."

Violet flew like the wind for her little blue cloak, which, by good luck, was waterproof, before she plunged down with her leader into the wet ferns. Poor little Vi ! that first plunge was rather disheartening, after all her delightful anticipations. The ferns were almost as tall as she was ; and her little varnished shoes, her cotton stockings and frock, were small protection from the wet. Excitement kept her up for some time ; but when her companion, far in advance of her, called loudly to Vi to come on, I think nothing but the dread of being taunted with cowardice ever after, and shut out from further participation in such expeditions, kept the child from breaking down. She held out valiantly, however, and after various adventures—one of which consisted

in a scramble up to Val's favourite seat among the high branches, whither he half dragged, half carried her, leaving the basket at the foot of the tree—they reached the bank on the side of the water where the sun shone, and dried her wet skirts and shoes. Here the true delight of the truants began. "Take off your shoes and stockings, and I'll put them in the sun to dry," said Val, who, in his rough way, took care of her ; and Violet had never known any sensation so delightful as the touch of the warm, mossy, velvet grass upon her small bare feet, except the other sensation of feeling the warm shallow water ripple over them, as Val helped her out by the stepping-stones to the great boulders at the side of the linn. The opposite bank was one waving mass of foliage, in all the tender tints of the early summer ; whilst on that along which the children had been strolling, the trees retired a little, to leave a lovely grassy knoll, with an edge of golden sand and sparkling pebbles. Through this green world the Esk ran, fretted by the opposition of the rocks, foaming over them so close by Violet's side that, perched upon her boulder, she could put her hand into the foaming current, and feel it rush in silken violence, warm and strong, carrying away with lightning speed the flowers she dropped into it—till her own childish head grew giddy, and she felt all but whirled away herself, notwithstanding that she sat securely in an arm-chair of rock, where her guardian had placed her. Vi would have been happy, beyond words to tell, thus seated almost in the middle of the stream, with the water rushing and foaming, the leaves shining and rustling, the whole universe full of nothing but melodious storms of soft sound—loud, yet soft, penetrating heart and soul—had it not been for the freaks of that wild guardian, who would perch himself on the topmost point of the boulder on one foot, with the other extended over the rushing linn ; or jump the chasm back and forward with shouts of joyous laughter, indifferent to all her remonstrances, which, indeed, he did not hear in the roar of the waterfall. But the fearful joy was sweet, though mixed with panic indescribable. "Oh, Val, if you had fallen in !" she cried, half hysterical with fright and pleasure, when they got back in safety to the grassy bank. I suspect Val was rather glad to be back too in safety, though he could not restrain the masculine impulse of showing his prowess, and dazzling and frightening the small woman who furnished the most

appreciative audience Val had ever yet encountered in his short life.

I need not attempt to describe the consternation which filled all bosoms in the two houses from which the truants had fled, when their absence was discovered. The Pringles arrived to find their chicken-pie gone, and their daughter—and Lady Eskside white with terror, consulting with old Jean Moffatt at the cottage door. Jean was not so deeply alarmed, and could not restrain her sense of the joke, the ravished larder, and the prudent provision of the runaways ; but poor Lady Eskside did not see the joke. “How can we tell the children alone did it ?” she cried, with terrible thoughts in her mind of some gipsy rescue—some wild attempt of the boy’s mother to take him away again. She was ghastly with fear as she examined the marks on the dyke where the culprits had scrambled over. “No bairn ever did that,” cried the old lady, infecting Mr Pringle at least with her terrors. Lord Eskside and Harding and the gamekeepers were dispersed over the woods in all directions, searching for the lost children, and the old lady was on her way to the lower part of the stream, though all agreed it was almost impossible that little Vi could have walked so far as the linn, the most dangerous spot on Esk. “Would you like to come with me ?” my lady said with white lips to Mrs Pringle, whose steady bosom, accustomed to the vagaries of seven boys, took less alarm, but who was sufficiently annoyed and anxious to accept the offer. Mr Pringle got over the dyke in the traces of the fugitives, to follow their route to the same spot, and thus all was excitement and alarm in the peaceful place. “It is not the linn I fear—it is those wild folk,” cried poor Lady Eskside in the misery of her suspense, forgetting that it was her adversary’s wife who was also her fellow-sufferer. But good Mrs Pringle was nobody’s adversary, and had long ago given up all thought of the Eskside lordship. She received this agitated confidence calmly. “They could have no reason to carry off my little Vi,” she said, with unanswerable good sense. The two ladies drove down the other side of the hill to the water-side, a little below the linn, and leaving the carriage, walked up the stream—one of them at least with such tortures of anxiety in her breast, as the mother of an only child alone can know. Mrs Pringle was a little uneasy too, but her boys had been in so many scrapes, out of which they

had scrambled with perfect safety, that her feelings were hardened by long usage. At the linn some traces were visible, which still further consoled Violet's mother, but did not affect Lady Eskside—Violet's little handkerchief to wit, very wet, rather dirty, and full of wild flowers. "They have been playing here," said the more composed mother. "*She* has been here," cried the old lady; "but oh, my boy! my boy!"

"I see something among the trees yonder," cried Mrs Pringle, running on. Lady Eskside was over sixty, but she ran too, lighter of foot than her younger companion, and inspired with fears impossible to the other. The sun had set by this time, but the light had not waned—it had only changed its character, as the light of a long summer evening in Scotland changes, magically, into a something which is not day, but as clear as day, sweeter and paler—a visionary light in which spirits might walk abroad, and all sweet visions become possible. Hurrying through this tender, pale illumination of the woodland world about them, the two ladies came suddenly upon a scene which neither of them, I think, ever forgot. It was like a tender travesty, half touching, half comic, of some maturer tale. Between two great trees lay a little glade of the softest mossy grass, with all kinds of brown velvet touches of colour breaking its soft green; vast beech-boughs, stretching over it like a canopy, and a gleam of the river just visible. Over the foreground were scattered the remains of a meal, the central point of which—the dish which had once been a pie—caught Mrs Pringle's rueful gaze at once. A mass of half-faded flowers, a few late primroses, mixed with the pretty though scentless blue violet which grows along with them, lay dropped about in all directions, having been, it appeared, crazily propped up as an ornament to the rustic dinner-table. Against the further tree were the little runaways—Violet huddled up in her blue cloak, with nothing of her visible but her little head slightly thrown back, leaning half on the tree, half on her companion, who, supporting himself against the trunk, gave her a loyal shoulder to rest upon. The little girl had cried herself to sleep—tears were still upon her long eyelashes, and the little pouting rose-mouth was drawn down at the corners. But Valentine was not sleeping. He was pondering terrible thoughts under his knitted brows. How he was ever to get home—how he was ever to

get *her* home ! The boy was chilled and depressed and worn out, and awful anticipations were in his mind. What would happen if they had to stay there all night through the midnight darkness, among the stirrings of the mysterious woods ? Val knew what strange sounds the woods make when it is dark, and you are alone in them—and a whole night ! His mind was too much confused to hear the soft steps of the two ladies who stood behind the other big beech, looking, without a word, at this pretty scene—Lady Eskside, for her part, too much overpowered by the sudden sense of relief to be able to speak. I am not sure that a momentary regret over her chicken-pie did not make itself felt in Mrs Pringle's soul ; but she, too, paused with a little emotion to look at the unconscious baby-pair, leaning against each other in mutual support ; the little woman overwhelmed with remorse and fatigue, the little man moody and penitent over the dregs of the feast, and the wild career of pleasure past. But just then there came a crash of branches, and louder steps resounding down the brae among the ferns, which made Val's face light up with hope and shame, and woke little Violet from her momentary oblivion. Lord Eskside's party of beaters, and Mr Pringle, solitary but vigorous, all converged at the same moment upon this spot. "Here, my lord," said Willie Maitland's hearty voice, with laughter that made the woods ring—"here are your babes in the wood."

CHAPTER XII.

THE exploit of the Babes in the Wood, as Willie Maitland called it, was one of the last freaks which Valentine played in his childhood by Eskside. Mr Grinder, who was from Oxford, a cultured and dainty young Don, was recognised to be no fit tutor for a child who preferred the woods to the classics, and could not construe a bit of Greek decently to save his life. What agonies Mr Grinder went through while his term of office lasted I will not attempt to describe. He was a young man of fine mind, one of the finest minds of his day, and that was saying a great deal. He loved pic-

tures and fine furniture and dainty decorations as well as Richard Ross did, though perhaps he was not quite so learned ; and when he first saw the great green cabinets in the drawing-room, could barely say the common civilities to Lady Eskside before he went on his knees to adore the Vernis-Martin. It may be supposed how little this dainty personage had in common with the boy, always carrying an atmosphere of fresh air about him, his pockets bulged out with unknown implements, his boots often clogged with mud, and his hands not always clean, whom it seemed a kind of desecration to introduce, all rustic and noisy, into the shadowy world of the Greek drama. Mr Grinder, I am afraid, had looked with lenient eye upon his pupil's absence on that June day. He had not reported the truant, but reconciled himself easily to the want of him ; and it was only when the day was almost over that he had taken fright at the boy's prolonged absence. Lady Eskside could not forgive him the panic he had caused her, and as soon as the most exquisite politeness and delicate pretences of regret made it possible, Mr Grinder and his knick-knacks were got rid of ; and a hard-working student from Edinburgh College, toiling mightily to make his way into the Scotch Church, and indifferent what labours he went through to attain this end, reigned in his stead. He was perhaps not so pleasant a person to have in the house, my lady allowed, but far better for the boy, which was the first object. The new man cared nothing about the sanctity of the Greek drama, and perhaps did not know very much, if the truth were told. He turned Valentine on to Homer, and marched him through battle and tempest with some rough sense of the poetry, but very little delicacy about the grammar. But he kept his eye upon his pupil, and got a certain amount of work out of him, and prevented all such runaway expeditions, relieving the old people from their anxieties for the moment at least.

Val was not an easy boy to manage. He had two natures in him, as Lady Eskside said,—the one wild, adventurous, uncontrollable ; the other more than ordinarily impressionable by social influences. But when a boy gets into his teens he is not so easily kept up to the pitch of drawing-room polish as is a dainty little gentleman of eight in velvet and lace. With the period of black jackets the histrionic power begins to wane—temporarily at least : and when Val

at thirteen turned his back upon the Dowager Duchess, and fretted furiously against being taken to make calls, his terrified grandmother thought immediately, not of his age, but of the mother's blood, which made him clownish ; and not only thought so herself, but was seized with a panic lest others should think so. It had made her proud to see how far her little Val surpassed in manners the Marquis of Hightowers ; but it did not console her to think that Valentine now was no worse than his exalted neighbour. For, alas ! the mother of Hightowers had as many quarterings on her shield as his august father, and the boy might be as great a lout as he liked without exciting any remark or suspicion ; whereas poor Val could never be free of possible criticism on the score of his mother's blood.

This troubled the serenity of his childhood, though Val himself did not know the reason why. His recollections of the earlier period of his life had grown very vague in these years. Val had been well disposed to be communicative on the subject when he came to Eskside first. He had shown on many occasions a dangerous amount of interest and knowledge as to the economy of the travelling vans which sometimes passed through Lasswade with shows of various kinds, or basketmakers or tinkers ; and once had followed one of them for miles along the road, and had been brought back again much disfigured with weeping, whimpering that his mammy must be there. But children are very quick to perceive when their recollections are not acceptable to the people about them, and still more easily led into other channels of thought ; and as he had nothing near him to recall that chapter of his life to his mind, he gradually forgot it. There was still a vague light of familiarity and interest in his eyes if, by any chance, he came upon an encampment of gipsies, or the vans of a show, or even the travelling tramps upon the road ; but the boy, I think, came to be ashamed of this feeling of interest, and to divine that his early life was no credit to him, but rather something to be concealed, about the same time as he ceased to be the perfect little actor and social performer he had been in his first stage. He began to be conscious of himself, that most confusing and bewildering of experiences. This consciousness comes later or earlier, according to the constitution of the individual ; but when it comes it has always a confusing influence upon the young mind and life. When one's self

thrusts into sight, and insists upon filling up the foreground of the scene, it changes all natural rules of proportion and perspective. The child or the youth has to review everything around him over again to get it into keeping with this new phantom suddenly arisen, which does nothing but harass his mind, and puts him out in all his calculations. Me—how much has been said about it, philosophies based upon it, the whole heaven and earth founded on this atom! but there is nothing that bewilders the young soul so much as to see it surging up through the fair, sunny, matter-of-fact universe, and through the world of dreams, disturbing and disarranging everything. This change befell Valentine early. I think it began from that day in the woods, which was full of so many experiences. Even then he had been faintly conscious of himself—conscious of “showing off” to dazzle Violet on the linn—conscious of deceiving her as to their safety when she began to cry with fatigue and loneliness, and he, upon whom all the responsibility of the escapade lay, had to think how she was to be got home. In the chaotic bit of existence which followed, when Oxford, worsted, left the field, and Edinburgh, dauntless, came in, Valentine had a tough fight with this Frankenstein of himself, this creature which already had lived two lives, and possessed a vague confusing world of memories half worn out, yet not altogether extinct, alongside of his actual existence. I do not mean to pretend that the boy was a prodigy of reflectiveness, and brooded over these thoughts night and day; but yet there were times when they would come into his mind, taking all his baby grace away from him, and all the security and power of unconsciousness. Lady Eskside did not know what had come over her boy. She discussed it eagerly with her old lord, who tried in vain to dismiss the subject. “He’s at the uncouth age, that’s all,” said Lord Eskside. “Oh, I hope it is not his mother’s blood!” said the old lady. And thus the delightful day of playing truant in the woods was the primary cause of a wonderful revolution in Val’s affairs. The grandfather and grandmother made up their minds to deny themselves, and send him to school.

The incident of the Babes in the Wood made a still greater impression on the other culprit. Mrs Pringle took her little daughter home, not without some emotion—for what mother can resist the delighted look of absolute security which comes

to the face even of a naughty child, when, out of unimaginable danger and tragic desolation, it suddenly beholds the Deliverer appear—the parent in whom Providence and Power and Supreme Capacity are conjoined? But she was half amused at the same time; and indeed the whole household at the Hewan regarded Vi's escapade with more amusement than alarm. "Oh, Miss Violet, to tak' the pie!—that was a' I had for your papa's and mamma's dinner," said old Jean. "They maun be content with ham and eggs noo, for I've naething else in the hoose. My larder's sweepit clean," she added, when Violet had been carried off to have her damp and draggled garments changed. "Cheese and biscuits and everything there was: my word, but yon laddie maun have a good stomach! You wouldna think to bring the pie-dish back?"

"Indeed, we were too thankful," said Mrs Pringle, "to find the bairns—"

"Oh, the bairns! bless you, there was never ony fear o' the bairns; but my dish was new, or as good as new. I'll give little Johnny at the farm a penny to gang and look for't. There was three fine fat young chickens, no' to speak of eggs and a' the seasoning. If that laddie's no' ill the morn he maun be an ostridge, or whatever ye ca' the muckle bird ye get the feathers from; and a' the morning's milk and the new bread I laid in for your suppers! Just an ostridge! I wish the laddie nae harm, but he should have a sair head the morn, and a good licking, if he gets what he deserves."

"Alexander," said Mrs Pringle, an hour or two later, when she, with a warm shawl on, took a seat for ten minutes on the earthen dyke to keep her husband company while he smoked his cigar. The night was still clear, and pale with the lingering of the light, though it was past ten o'clock; and the western sky shone with such silvery tints of celestial hue, sublime visions of colour, free of all earthly crudeness, as are never visible save in a northern summer. "Alexander, Sandy's wife, if he lives to have one, will never be Lady Eskside; but I would not wonder if you and me had more interest in that title than any daughter-in-law could give us. We'll see what time may bring forth."

"You mean you'll have it yourself? I am sure I hope so, one day, my dear," said Mr Pringle, complacently: "not meaning any harm to Dick Ross; but his was never a very strong life."

"I am not meaning myself," said Mrs Pringle, provoked. "How obtuse you are, you men! Neither you nor Sandy will ever have the lordship, you may take my word for that."

"And what do I care then who is my lady?" said the heavy husband. "I don't really see, my dear, why you should be so very decided against your husband and son. One would think you would be more likely to take our side."

Mrs Pringle shrugged her shoulders slightly, and drew her shawl closer round her. What was the use of throwing away her pearls—her higher insight? She changed the subject; and by-and-by, having no consolation of a cigar, and finding the lovely twilight chilly, though it was so beautiful, she went in, and went up-stairs to the little room in the roof where Violet lay warm and cosy, with her bright eyes still open, and turned to the soft clear sky of which her attic window was full. "Oh, mamma, was it very, very wicked to go?" said Violet. Her mother stooped to kiss the little tearful face.

"We'll say no more about it, Vi—but you must never play truant again."

"Never!" cried Vi, with a half sob which prolonged the word, and made it echo through the tiny chamber. Alas! there was more than penitence in that vow; there was regret, there was the ghost of a delight made doubly precious by trouble and terror. Oh no, never again! but what had all Violet's discreet and exemplary life—a life irreproachable and full of every (nursery) virtue—to show, which could compare with the transport, and terror, and misery, and sweetness, of that one never-to-be-repeated day?

Vi had a great deal to bear afterwards, when the boys heard the story, and held over her the recollection of the "day she played truant," with all that delight in torture which is natural to their kind. But with all this they could not take from her the memory of it, which grew dearer in proportion as she buried it in her own small bosom. The running of the water, the rustling of the leaves, the solemn drowse of noon in the full sunshine, the soft velvet rush of the foaming linn over the little fingers with which she tried to stop its torrent, and all the stirs and movements among the trees, peopled the child's recollection for many a day. Seated at a dull window in Moray Place, looking out upon the stiff garden with its shrubs—public property, and un-

lovely as public property generally is—Violet could see once more her bold companion leaping from one boulder to another, with the furious Esk underneath, and feel again a delicious thrill of visionary terror. She had learned more about “the country,” about woods and wilds, and birds and squirrels, and about the sensations of explorers in a new-discovered land, than anything else could have taught her. “I too in Arcadia,” she could have said: her one day of playing truant was the possession out of which she drew most enjoyment; and I leave the gentle reader to imagine, as Violet grew older, whether she could dismiss the partner of this celestial piece of wickedness into the mere common region of indifference, and leave him there undistinguished by any preference. She was always Val’s defender afterwards, when any discussion of his merits arose among the boys; and what was more remarkable still, Mrs Pringle became Val’s warm partisan and supporter, dismissing almost with indignation any suggestion which might be made to his disfavour. She was impatient of what she called her husband’s “whimsey” about his heirship. “It is just a piece of folly,” she would say with some heat. “Are the Esk-sides fools to take up a false heir? or what motive could they have? Your father is a very clever man, and has a great deal of sense in a general way. But, boys, don’t you build any hopes upon this, for it’s just nonsense. You may be sure they are not the kind of folk to commit themselves, or expose the property to certain waste and destruction, with an impostor for an heir—” That he should have so important a deserter from his standard filled Mr Pringle with surprise. He was justified in thinking that it would have been natural that, right or wrong, she should have placed herself on her own boy’s side. But Mrs Pringle was a woman who was given to an opinion of her own, and was not to be persuaded out of it when once formed upon sufficient cause.

And thus the soft-paced time went on, gently, dallying with the children, spinning out long tranquil days for them, and years that seemed as if they would never be over, as he does not do with their elders. They grew up slowly like the grass, which never shows itself in the act of growing, but is, while yet we are unaware of it; the happiest of all life’s various periods—not only to the younglings, who are unconscious of it, but also to the fathers and mothers, who sometimes have an inkling of the truth. It looks long while

it is in progress, thank heaven—though after, I suppose, when it is over, and the birds are out of the nest, it is like everything else in life, as short to look back upon as a tale that is told. But in the meantime there is little more to be said than that the children grew. And by-and-by RossCraig House fell into sudden shadow, as if the sun had gone behind a cloud, and the voices in it died down into subdued sounds of old people's voices, as had been the case before the child came to it, turning everything topsy-turvy. Val had been sent to school.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE school that Valentine Ross, Lord Eskside's grandson and heir, was sent to was, naturally, Eton. His father had been educated there, but not his grandfather, who belonged to an older fashion in education as in everything else, and was Scotch to his fingers' tips, and to every shade of idea in his mind. Valentine was placed with the brother of the tutor who had succeeded so indifferently with his early training—a kind of mingled compensation for that failure, and keeping up of old associations—for Mr Grinder's father had been Richard's tutor—which satisfied Lord and Lady Eskside. The boy's departure was no small trial to the old people. Each of them said something to him privately before he went away. Lord Eskside took him out for a last walk, and showed him the new feus that had been marked out, and told him confidentially—recognising for the first time his partially grown-up condition—of the improvements he had been making, and the addition to the rent-roll of the estate which the feus would give—“enough to pay your school expenses, Val,” he said; and then he gave his grandson his parting advice.

“You have not to make your living by learning,” said the old lord, “therefore I don't bid you give every moment to it that health allows; but a good scholar is always a credit to every rank in life; and if a thing is worth doing at all, it's worth doing well. But there are other things at Eton

besides books. A man in the position you will hold should know men like himself—not only the outside of them, but their ways of thinking, and what's working in their heads. The working of young heads is a sign how the tide's going; and I want you, if it's in you, Val, some time or other, to go on the top of the tide—not just to be dragged with the swing of it, like common lads. You're too young for that at present, but when you're old enough you must try to get into what societies they have—debating, or the like. I don't know very well what you're going to turn to. You have good abilities—very good abilities—and plenty of spirit when you like; and mind, to give yourself over to play, and nonsense games, is bairnly, not manly—I would have you recollect that."

"Do you mean cricket, grandpapa?" said Valentine, with astonished eyes.

"I mean everything that turns a gentleman into a player, sir," said the old lord, knitting his brows; "setting sport above the honest concerns of this life and the ruling of the world—which is what young men of good family are born for, if they like to put their hand to their work. To set up a game in the highest place is bairnly, Val—mind what I say to you—and not manly. If you mean to put your life into cricket, you had better make up your mind to earn your bread by it, and give up the other trade I'm speaking of—which is not to say you may not play to amuse yourself," he added, dropping from the seriousness of the previous address, "and, in moderation, as much as you like; only never make a business of a mere pleasure. I am taking you into my confidence," Lord Eskside continued, after a little pause. "I want you to go into public life at home. Your father will not, and he has his reasons, which are perhaps good enough; and I had not the time nor the possibility when I was young like you. I succeeded early, for one thing; and a Scotch representative peer does not cut much of a figure in politics. But you, my boy, have little chance of succeeding early. If your father lives to be as old as I am, you have a long career before you—and you'll mind my advice."

"Yes, grandpapa," said the boy, bewildered. Valentine was proud, yet much confounded, to be thus advanced to the position of his grandfather's confidant, and spoken to as if he were on the verge of the university, instead of entering

at fourteen a public school. He did his best to understand, with eyes intent upon the old man's face.

"The secret of all success, Val," said the old lord, "is to know how to deny yourself. It does not matter very much what the object is. That's one advantage about even these games I was speaking of. Training, as they call it, is a good thing, an excellent thing. If you once learn to get the whip-hand of yourself, that's the best education. There is nothing in this world like it, Val. Prove to me that you can control yourself, and I'll say you're an educated man ; and without this, all other education is good for next to nothing. Other people, no doubt, can do you harm more or less, but there is no living creature can do you the harm yourself can. I would write that up in gold letters on every school, if I had it in my power. Not that I like asceticism —far from it—but a man is no man that cannot rule himself."

Lord Eskside paused with a sigh, while the boy looked at him with eyes and ears intent, taking in the words, but not all or indeed much of their meaning. And here I think Val's attention began to wane a little ; for he had not the slightest clue to the thoughts into which the old man plunged, almost against his will—the dismal recollections of shipwreck which crowded into his mind as he spoke. "We won't enter into the subject at length," he resumed ; "but, Val, you have more than ordinary occasion to be upon your guard."

"Why have I more than ordinary occasion ?" said the boy, wondering and curious ; this mysterious intimation immediately roused him up.

"Ah, well, we'll say nothing about that. You've wild blood in you, my boy ; and when you're a man, you'll remember that I gave you sound advice. These are the great things, Val. I don't need to tell you to be good, for I hope you know your duty. Try and never do anything that you would think shame to have told to us ; you may be sure sooner or later that it will be told to us, and to every soul you want it kept from. There's no such thing as a secret in this world ; and the more you want to hide a thing the more it's known—mind that. For lesser matters, I'll see you have enough of pocket-money, and I hope you'll take care to spend it like a gentleman—which does not mean to throw it away with both hands, mind ; and

you'll keep your place, and learn your lessons like a man ; and you'll write regularly to your grandma ; and God bless you, Val ! ”

Saying this, the old lord wrung the boy's hand, and turned off down a side path, leaving him alone in the avenue. Lord Eskside's shaggy eyebrows were working, and something strangely like tears welled up somehow from about his heart, and stood in two pools, unsheddable, under these penthouses. Not for all he had in the world would he have let that moisture drop in sight of living man.

Val was somewhat startled by this abrupt withdrawal, and tried hard, without being quite able, to make it out, what it meant ; for the notion that he himself was supremely loved by his old grandfather was one that did not immediately enter into the boy's mind, far from all sentimental consciousness as boys' minds generally are. He went up thoughtfully to the house, but I am afraid it was not the wisdom of his grandfather's advice or the contagion of his emotion which moved him. He was wondering what it meant—why *he*, Valentine, should have more than ordinary reason to take care ; and what was the wild blood he had in his veins ? The wonder was vague ; I cannot say that the boy was possessed by any eager longing to penetrate the mystery ; but still he wondered, having arrived at a kind of crisis in his life, a thing which makes even a child think. He went in to his grandmother serious, and, as she thought, sad ; and Lady Eskside was pleased by the cloud over his face, and set it down to his sorrow at leaving home, putting her own sentiments into Valentine's mind, as we all do.

“ You must not be down-hearted, Val,” she said, drawing him close to her, and speaking with a quiver in her lip. “ When once the shock is over, you will find plenty of new friends, and be very happy. It is natural at your age. It is us that will miss you, oh my bonnie boy ! far, far more than you will miss my old lord and me.”

Val did not say anything ; he felt his breast swell with a certain soft sympathy, but he was not deeply dismayed at the thought of leaving home, as she supposed. Lady Eskside put her arm round him, and drew her boy close. She was not ashamed of the tears that came heavily to her eyes.

“ My bonnie boy ! ” she said, “ my darling ! Ye cannot think what you have been to us, Val—like light to them in darkness ; you've made God's providence clear to me, though

you're too young to understand why. When you are away, Val, you'll think of that. If anything ill were to happen to you in body or soul, it would break my heart—you'll remember that? Oh, my own boy, be good! There are all kinds at a great school, some not innocent lads like you. You'll shut your ears to bad words and wicked things for my sake? Don't listen to them—but say your prayers night and morning, and read your chapter, and God will protect my boy. Nobody can make you do wrong, Val, except yourself."

"But I don't mean to do wrong, grandma," said Valentine, with a little self-assertion. "Why should you think I would? Is there anything particular about me?"

"There is a great deal particular about you," said the old lady; "you are the hope and the joy of two old folk that would never hold up their heads again in this world if any harm came to you. Is not that enough? But I am not afraid of my boy," she added, seeing that the admonition had gone far enough, and smiling a wintry watery smile, the best she could muster. "Mind all that Mr Grinder says, and don't be too rough in your play. You're a very stirring boy, Val; but I want my boy to be always a gentleman, and not too rough. Your manners are not so nice as they once were——"

"I'm not a baby any longer," said the boy. "I don't know how to speak to ladies and grand people; but I don't mean to be rough."

"Well, dear, perhaps that is true," said Lady Eskside, with a sigh; "but you'll mind, Val, to be very particular about your manners as well as other things. It's more important than you think."

"I wish you would tell me something, grandma," said Val; "why is it more important than I think? and what do grandpapa and you mean by saying that I need to be on my guard more than others? There must be something particular about me."

"Then your grandpapa has been speaking to you!" said the old lady, with a little vexation, feeling herself forestalled. "I suppose, being old, we are more particular than most people, and more anxious. Your father, you see, makes no such fuss."

"I don't know anything about my father, grandma."

"Oh, Val, hush! he is at a distance, where duty keeps

him ; he has never been at home but that once since you came, and he is not a good correspondent ; but now that you are at school you must write to him direct, and be sure he will answer. He knows you are safe in our hands."

"That may be," said Val, seriously ; "but still, you see, grandma, it's a fact that I don't know much about my father—nor my mother either," he added, suddenly dropping his voice. Since he had been a small child, he had not mentioned her before. Lady Eskside could not restrain a startled movement, which he felt, standing so close to her. The boy lifted his eyes and fixed them on her face.

"Was that her, grandma," he said in a low voice, "that brought me here ? and why is she never here now ? I know there is something strange about me, for all you say."

"Do you remember her, Val ?"

"No," said the boy, somewhat impatiently ; "that is, I remember *her*, but not to know her now if I saw her. Why do you never speak of her ? why is she never here ? I think I ought to know."

"Oh, my dear, it's a long story—a long and a sad story," said the old lady. "I wish—I wish I could find her, Val. I have sought for her everywhere, both now and when you were born ; but I cannot find her. It is not our fault."

"Where is she ?" said the boy. His face was flushed and agitated, his utterance hurried and breathless as if with shame.

"I tell you we cannot find her, Val."

"But she is alive, in the world, *like that ?*" said the boy ; and drew a long painful breath. Lady Eskside could not tell, and dared not ask, how much Val understood or remembered of his mother and her life when he said these words ; and indeed, I think the boy himself would have found it very difficult to tell. He had lost all clear recollection of her in those seven years past, which were just the years in which a child forgets most easily—or remembers most tenaciously, when its recollections are encouraged and cultivated. He recollects dimly his coming to Eskside, and more dimly a life beyond, which was not as his present life,—a curious dull chaos of wanderings and change, with a woman in it and a playfellow, for whom he used to cry of nights. The chief impression on his mind, however, was of the strange difference between that life and his present one. He had escaped out of that into this ; and the thought of

being made to go back again gave him a sensation of vague alarm. If this woman was his mother, might she not meet him somewhere, claim him, take him back again? This thought filled him with a confused and indescribable horror. He had experienced this strange feeling before now; when he saw caravans passing—when he met a wandering party of tramps on the road—it had occurred to him more than once, what if some one should claim him? though he scarcely knew the ground of his own fears. This had given a curious inarticulate duality to his life. There were two of him. One Valentine Ross, whom he could identify boldly, who was happy and free and beloved—the other, something he did not know. But after his conversation with his grandmother, this vague terror suddenly took shape and form. His mother, his *real* mother, who had a right to him, might claim him, might seize upon him and carry him away. The idea filled him for the moment with mortal terror. He lost the security of childhood, and for the time felt himself involved in that insecurity, that panic, which is more terrible to a child than it ever can be in more mature life. A spasm came into his throat—a pang of shame and outraged feeling—which added to the terror, and made it very hard to bear. His eyes grew wet with a hot-springing moisture, salt and bitter, which seemed to scorch his eyelids. Lady Eskside, partially discovering the agitation in the boy's mind, pressed him closer to her in sympathy and tenderness; but he set his elbows square, and repulsed the fond consoling movement. He was angry with her, and with all the world, because he himself was thus separated from all the world, though he was no more than a child.

"I am going out," he said abruptly, with a slight struggle to be free, "to say good-bye to Hunter and the rest. I promised to say good-bye to them. Let me go, grandma; I shall not be long away."

"Come back before dinner, dear. You are to have your dinner with us to-night," said the old lady, kissing his hot forehead as she let him go. He ran from her, and out into the woods, and never drew breath till he reached Hunter the gamekeeper's cottage, which was two miles off. The hot tears dried in the boy's eyes as he ran, swift as an arrow from the bow. It was a half-savage way of relieving the pain in him; yet it did relieve it, probably because of the half-savage blood which was boiling in his veins. He did

not feel quite sure that he was safe even in the woods, and flew as if some one were pursuing him. In this panic there mingled no curiosity about his mother—no longing wish to see her—no stirring of filial love, such as one would imagine natural in such a case. Strangely enough, children show little curiosity in most cases about the parents they have lost. It seems so natural to them to accept what is, as absolutely unchangeable, the one only state of affairs they have ever known, as the state which must be, and to which there is no alternative. The very idea of an alternative disturbs the young mind, and wounds it. And Valentine had more than ordinary cause to be disturbed. He was afraid and he was ashamed of that duality in his existence. It mortified him as only a child can be mortified. If he could only forget it, shut it out of his mind for ever! He did not want to hear any more upon the subject, which was hateful to him; he could not bear even to think that any one was aware how much of it he knew. The sight of the little colony of children and dogs at the gamekeeper's was a wholesome distraction to his burdened mind; and fortunately there were many people to be shaken hands with, and to be told of his start to-morrow. "To Edinburgh first, and then to London! My word, Mr Valentine, but you'll be far afore us all, country folk. And I wouldna wonder but you would see the Queen and the House of Parliament, and a' thing that's splendid," said the gamekeeper's wife. The boy was pleased; the thought of all the novelty to come moved him for a moment; but even the delight of novelty could not banish from his mind his new horror and fear.

He dined with his grand-parents that night as they had promised; and the old people watched him with an anxious scrutiny, of which the child was vaguely conscious. They had no insight into the tempest that was surging in his childish bosom, but watched him as wistfully as if they had been the children and he the man, wondering whether "his mother's blood" was working in him, and any wild desire of adventure and vagrancy like hers arising in his mind, or whether he was thinking of and longing for her, which seemed the most natural supposition. I think, had they known the selfish shame and fear which had taken possession of him, both of them would have been disappointed and shocked, even though satisfied. They would

have blamed the boy as without natural feeling, and they would have been wrong. The feeling in Valentine's heart was all chaotic, undeveloped. He had found out what was the meaning of the contradiction of two natures in him, the jar of which he had been dimly conscious, without knowing what it was. The struggle itself had been going on within him for years, since the time when, a mere child, he had suffered and conquered that natural thirst for the out-of-door life to which he had been born. He had stood by his nursery window many a day and gazed out, and beaten his head and his hands against the panes, longing to escape, with a longing which was only recognised as naughtiness, and which by force of circumstances and some innate force of nature had been restrained. His ductile infantine nature had been forced into the new channel, and now he thought of the old one with a thrill and shiver of imaginative terror: but no distinct enlightenment as to his own position pierced the childish imbroglio of his thoughts. He felt rather than thought that he was in danger; he had lost his happy sense of security; but his mind had not gone further. All this, however, was as invisible, as unrevealable, to the two old people, who watched him so anxiously, as their eager watch was to him. He had not left their charge for a day for seven long years, and yet they knew as little of him as you and I, dear reader, know of the child who has never left our side, and has, as it seems, no thought, no object in life apart from ours. How can we tell what that unknown familiar creature will do when set out upon independent life for itself? and how could they tell what was passing in Val's bosom, which had no window to it, any more than the rest of us have?

They watched him, however, very closely, consulting each other now and then with their eyes, and said things to him which meant more than the words, but which Val received without thinking at all what they meant. That last night at home was meant to be a solemn one, and would have been so, had Val's mind not been absorbed in its own excitement. Lord Eskside gave him a watch, which made his heart jump for the moment—a gold hunting-watch, such as Val had long admired and longed for, with his initials and crest on the back; but even this affected him much less than it would have done, had he received it a week—a day before. He was to start early the next morn-

ing, and his portmanteaus were packed, and everything ready that night. He went and looked at them before he went to bed, and the higher pulsation of novelty and adventure began to swell in his young veins. The shadow slid still a little further off his heart when Lady Eskside came into his room on her way to her own, as she had done every night for years. Val was not asleep, but only pretended to be so, to avoid any self-betrayal. The boy, peering curiously through his eyelashes, which showed him this little scene as through a veil of tinted gauze, saw the old lady put down her candle, look at him closely, and when she saw him, as she thought, fast asleep, kneel down by his bedside. She said no audible words, but she put her hands together and lifted her face, with tears standing full in her eyes. It was all Val could do not to cry too, and betray himself; the water came welling up, feeling warm within his eyelids, and blurring out the sight before him. After a little while my lady rose, and put her hand softly on his forehead and kissed him; then took up her candle and walked away, closing the door carefully after her not to wake her boy. Val felt strangely desolate for the first moment after the door closed, and the soft light and the watchful presence went away. He did not say anything tender within himself, for he was (or had become) a Scotch boy, totally unused to the employment of endearing words. But his small heart swelled, and a sense of soft security, of watchers round him, and ever-wakeful all-powerful love, came to him unawares.

Thus Val dropped asleep on his last night at home; and he woke in the morning cured of his first trouble, with as light a heart as any schoolboy need have—the shock having gone off with all its consequences, and his mind being too full of his new start, of his new watch, of his long journey—the first he had ever taken—and of Eton at the end most wonderful of all,—far too full of these things to be sad. He gave his grandmother a hug when the moment came to go away. “I’ll be back at Christmas, grandma,” he said, between laughing and crying. The old lord was going with his heir, and this “broke the parting very much, so that he bore up like a man,” Lady Eskside said afterwards, wishing, I fear, that Val had been a little more “overcome.” She shed tears enough for both of them after the carriage had driven away, with a large box of game—to conciliate Mr

Grinder—fastened on behind. From the window of one of the turrets she could see it driving across the bridge at Lasswade ; and there she went, though the stairs tired her, and waved her handkerchief out of the narrow window, and wept at thought of the dreariness he left behind him. It seemed to my lady that there was not one creature left in the great house, or on Eskside, up the water and down the water, save herself ; and thus Val made his first start in life.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE boy was very tired when he arrived in London, and not capable of the hot interest he expected to feel in the great muddy capital, which was one muddle of mean houses, noisy roads, carts and carriages, and crowding people, to his tired perceptions. The day after, he and his grandfather went to Windsor through the mild soft country, half veiled in the “mists and mellow fruitfulness” that distinguish autumn, and warm with the all-pervading and diffused sunshine of the season. How different was the calm slow river, lingering between its placid banks, seeking no coy concealment under cliff or tree, but facing the daylight with gentle indifference, from the wild shy Esk, which played at hide-and-seek with the sunshine, like a flying nymph among the woods ! The old lord seemed half inspired by this return to scenes which he remembered so well, though he had not been himself brought up at Eton. “I brought your father here, as I’m bringing you,” he said, as they rolled along round the curves of the railway, looking out upon the distant castle and the river. “You will see plenty of boats on the river in another day, my boy ; and if your grandma and I come here next summer, I daresay we shall see you strutting along in all your finery, with flowers in your hat, and a blue shirt.” Innocent old lord ! he thought his little rustic, just out of the nest, might reach the celestial heights of Eton in a few months, and perhaps—for what limits are there to the presumption of ignorance ?—find a place in the Eight in his first summer. But, indeed, I don’t really think Lord Eskside’s ignorance went so far as this. He said it, not know-

ing what else to say, to please the boy. They went down together to the great dame's house, full already of small boys settling into their familiar quarters, upon whom Val looked with all the wondering envy and respect natural to a freshman. He had himself assumed the tall hat for the first time in his life, and the sight of so many tall hats moving about everywhere confused yet excited him. His tutor, who was not his "dame," lived in a tiny house attached to a big pupil-room, and had no accommodation for boys or for much else, except the blue-and-white china in which his soul delighted. Mr Gerald Grinder, like his brother Mr Cyril Grinder, who had been Val's tutor at Esk-side, had one of the finest minds of his time; but the chief way in which this made itself evident to the outer world was in his furniture, and the fittings-up of his little house, every "detail" in which he flattered himself was a study. It was a very commonplace little house, but the thought that had been expended on its decoration might have built pyramids—if anything so rude and senseless as building pyramids could have occurred to the refined intelligence of a man of Mr Gerald Grinder's day. Val gazed at all the velvet brackets, and all the antique cabinets (which had been "picked up" in holiday travels all over the world, and were each the subject of a tale), and all the china, with a sense of failing breath and space too small for him; while his grandfather engaged Mr Grinder in conversation, and pointed out the boy's peculiarities, as if these characteristics could be of any particular interest to any one out of Val's own family—and the young tutor listened with a smile. "I don't doubt we shall soon know each other," he said suavely, and shook hands with Val, and dismissed him: to receive just such a description of another boy next moment from another anxious parent. "Whether is it Ross or Smith now, that is the self-willed one, and which is the boy that catches cold?" the young tutor asked himself, when the audience was over. He concluded, finally, that the latter case must be Smith's, since he was brought by his mother—a generalisation which perhaps was justifiable. Poor Mr Grinder! he knew all the marks of his china as well as these tiresome people knew, so to speak, the manufacturer's marks on their boys; but how much more interesting was one than the other! He took a walk up to Windsor to an old furniture shop, where bargains of precious ware were

now and then to be had, with a delicious sense of relief when it was too late to expect more pupils—and fell upon a bit of real Nankin there which refreshed his very soul.

Meanwhile the old lord and his boy strayed about the narrow streets. They went to the bookseller's and bought pictures for Val's room—which, I need not say, were chiefly Landseers, though, granting the subject, Val was not particular as to the artist ; and then they walked to the castle, the grandfather making a conscientious but painful attempt to remember who built the Round Tower, and who was responsible for St George's Chapel. As to these points, however, Val was not at all exacting, and had no thirst for information. He liked to walk on the terrace better, where the great sunny misty plain before him made his young heart expand with a delightful sense of space and distance, but did not care for the splendid alleys of the Long Walk, which were too formal to please his ill-regulated fancy. And then they went to the river, along the green bank of the Brocas, which touched Lord Eskside's heart with many recollections. “I have walked with your father here fifty times, I should think,” said the old lord. “He was not much of a boating man himself, but he was fond of the river. Your father had always what is called a fine mind, Val.”

“What is a fine mind ?” said the boy, who did not know very much about his father, or care a great deal, if the truth must be told.

“It's rather hard to define,” said the old lord, “when you don't possess the article ; and you must not learn to generalise too much, my boy ; it's a dangerous custom. It is, so far as I've been able to remark, an intellect which pays more attention to the small things than the great in this life ; it cares for what it calls the details, and lets the bigger matters shift for themselves.”

“Was my father—very good at anything ?” asked Val, whom this definition interested but moderately. He had some difficulty in shaping this question ; for indeed, having just heard that his father was not a boating man, his curiosity was partially satisfied before expressed.

“Your father has very good abilities,” said Lord Eskside —“very good abilities. I wish he would put them to more use. I've been told he was an elegant scholar, Val.”

“What is an elegant scholar, grandpa ?”

The old lord laughed. "Not me nor you," he said ; "and I doubt if either you or me are the stuff to make one of ; but your father was. I'll show you an old school-list at home with his name in it. I've heard his Latin verses were something very fine indeed ; Val, Latin verses are grand things. Poetry in English is a thriftless sort of occupation ; but a dead language makes all the difference. If you ever can make Latin verses like your father, you'll be a great man, Val."

Val never knew whether his grandfather was laughing at him when he adopted this tone. "Is my father a great man ?" he asked, with a serious face. "I should like to know a little more about him. I have only seen him once. Once is not much for a fellow to have seen his father ; and I was so small then, and never thought of anything."

"Most of us are just as well without thinking," said Lord Eskside, with a suppressed sigh, "except about your work, my boy. You may be sure you will want all your thoughts for your work."

"That is just how you always turn me off," said Val. "I ask you about my father, grandpa, and you tell me about my work. I will do my work," said the boy, with a dogged air, which he sometimes put on ; "but why does my father never come home ?—why doesn't he care for me ? All these fellows there are with their fathers. I like you a great deal better—but *why* doesn't he come ?"

"Because he likes his own way," said the old lord, "better than he likes you or me—better than he likes his own country or our homely life. Observe, my boy, this is nothing for you to judge, or make your remarks upon," he added, bending his brows at Val, who was not used to be looked on frowningly. "Your father is no boy like you, but a man, and able to judge for himself. His profession takes him abroad. He will be an ambassador one of these days, I suppose, and represent his sovereign—which is more honour than often falls to the lot of a poor Scots lord."

Val did not make any reply, and the pair continued their walk along the river-side. His father a representative of his sovereign ; his mother—. For the last time before he was engulfed by the practical schoolboy life which was more congenial to his years, Val felt the whirl of wonder, the strange chaos of his double life which was made up of such different elements, and lay as it were between two

worlds. His panic was gone, having worn itself out, and no real interest in his unknown mother kept her image before him ; but he felt the jar in him of these two existences, so strangely, widely separated. His head felt giddy, as if the world were turning round with him. But every moment the river was becoming more gay and bright, and the moving panorama before him after a while overcame his individual reflections. The "fellows" newly arrived were already crowding down to the river—little new boys standing about with their hands in their pockets looking wistfully on ; but the old *habitues* of the Thames asserted their superiority, and got afloat in swarms—some in the strange outriggers which Val had heard of, but had never seen before. Lord Eskside was as eager about the sight as if it had been he who was the new boy. "Look how light they are, Val !" he cried—"how cleverly they manage them ! If those long oars get out of balance the thing upsets. Look at that small creature there no bigger than yourself——"

"Bigger ! he's not up to my elbow," cried Val, indignant.

"Well, smaller than yourself : but you could not do that, you lout, to save your life."

Val's face grew crimson. "Come back next week, grandpa," he said, "and see if I can't ; or come along, I'll try now ; it would only be a ducking—and what do I care for a ducking ? I'll try this very day."

"Come back, come back, my boy ; they won't let you try to-day," cried the old lord, laughing at the boy's impetuosity. Val had turned back, and was rushing down to the "rafts" where boats were to be had ; and it was all that his grandfather could do to restrain him. "You are not, Val Ross, your own master—not to speak of other people's—here," he said, holding the boy by the arm, "but a member of a corporation, and you must obey the laws of it. They'll not give you a boat, or if they do, it will be because they think you don't belong to Eton ; and if you were to go out without fulfilling all the regulations, they'd punish you, Val."

"Punish me !" cried Val, with nostrils dilating, and a wild fire in his eyes.

"Ay, punish *you*, though you are such a great man. This will never do," said Lord Eskside ; "do you mean to struggle with me, sir, in the sight of all these lads ? Master yourself ! and that at once."

The boy came to himself with a gasp, as if he had been drowning. I don't think he had ever in his life been spoken to in so severe a voice. He ceased to resist, and the old lord gave up his hold on his arm, and continued in a lower tone—

" You must learn this lesson, my boy, at once. You are nobody here, and you must master yourself. Do it of your own will, and you show the makings of a man. Do it because you are compelled and what are you but a slave? The thing is in your own hands, Val," said Lord Eskside, softened, and putting off his peremptory tone; " you have almost made an exhibition, before all these strange lads, of yourself—and me."

Val did not say anything; his breast was swelling high, his heart throbbing with the effort he had made; and he was not pleased that he had been obliged to make the effort, nor did he feel that satisfaction in having done his duty which is said always to attend that somewhat difficult operation. He walked along the river-side panting and drawing his breath hard, as if he really had tried the experiment of a ducking. How he longed to do this thing which he had been assured he must not do! He would have liked to jump into the river and swim out to one of the long slim boats, poised like big dragon-flies on the water, and eject its rower, and take the vacant place; in which case, no doubt, Val would have come to signal grief, as he would have deserved—for he had never been in an outrigger in his life.

Then the pair went and dined at the hotel, where Val recovered his spirits; and then the old lord took the boy to his little room, where they found his things unpacked, and his pictures standing in a little heap against the wall, and his room almost filled up with the bed which had been folded up out of the way when they were there before. It was not like the luxurious large airy room which had been Val's at home, any more than the house with its long passages, with regiments of doors on either side, was like the old-fashioned arrangements of RossCraig. And here at last the parting so often rehearsed had to be done in earnest. " Master yourself," said the old lord, with a voice which was neither so cheery nor so firm as he meant it to be; " and God bless you, Val!" And then he was gone, walking up the dark street with a heavy heart in his old

bosom, and his eyebrows working furiously. And Val sat down upon his bed and looked round him wonderingly, and for the first time realised that he was left alone.

However, it is needless to enter upon the details of so very common a scene. Perhaps the boy shed a few tears silently when the maid took away his candle, and he felt that no soft step, subdued lest he should be sleeping, no rustling silken garments, could come into his room that night. In the morning he faced his new existence vigorously, and hung his pictures, and began his work without any weakness of recollection. The old people felt it a great deal more, and a great deal longer ; but Val could not have been known from the most accustomed and habitual schoolboy, and, stranger still, scarcely knew himself for anything else, after that night. At the end of the week he felt as if he had lived there all his life—as if he had been there before in some previous kind of existence. I suppose this readiness of a child to adapt itself to new habits, and make them its own, does but increase the strange unreality of life itself to the half-conscious mind—life which changes in a moment, so that one week seems like years, and years, being past, look as if they had never been.

At the end of the week Val wrote home ; and in his first letter there was this paragraph, written in his clearest hand :—

“ Tell grandpapa I rowed up to Surly Hall, a long way above where we walked, above locks, *in an outrigger*, this morning. I rowed another fellow and licked him. I passed swimming on Thursday, and *outriggers is very easy*. You have nothing to do but keep steady, and it flies like a bird.”

“ What is an outrigger ? ” said Lady Eskside, as she gave her husband the letter. The old lord gave an internal shiver, and thanked heaven that she did not remember ; and Val did not think it necessary to inform his anxious grand-parents how often he had swamped his little craft on the Friday, before he succeeded in making that triumphal progress to Surly on Saturday morning. “ He’s a determined rascal, that boy of yours, my lady,” was all the answer Lord Eskside made.

I would not assert, however, that Val found all his difficulties at school to be surmounted so easily as the outrigger. He had to go through the average number of accidents and perils, and overcome various wild stirrings of nature within

him, before he learned, as a true Etonian does, to take pride in the penalties and hardships as well as the pleasures which distinguish his school. Val's natural pride in his own person as Val Ross had to be met and routed by his artificial and conventional pride as a schoolboy, before, for instance, he could reconcile himself to be some one's fag, a fate which overtook him instantly. Little Lord Hightowers, the Duke's son, who was in the same house, took to it naturally, without any stirring of repugnance, and made his master's toast with conscientious zest, and went his master's errands, and accepted his share of the dainties he had fetched when that potentate was in a liberal mood, without any struggle whatever with himself. But Val had a struggle, the wild blood in his veins being unused to obedience and finding subjection hard. I am happy to say, however, that his powers were equal to the necessary sacrifice, and that he never made an exhibition of himself as he had been on the eve of doing on the day of his arrival. Time passed on, and Val grew and "mastered himself;" but sometimes did not master himself, and got into disgrace, and scrambled out again, and had no fair-weather voyage, but all a schoolboy's troubles at their hardest. Hightowers had a very much easier time of it; he was neither proud nor ambitious, but was just as happy at the foot of his division as anywhere else, quite as happy looking on at a game as playing, and took the floggings which overtook him periodically with the most heavenly calm; whereas the mere threat of one wrought Val to the point of desperation. Hightowers was better off than Val by right of his temperament and calmer blood. He took everything much more lightly, and used to discourse to his companion on the vanity of "making a fuss" with ponderous and precocious wisdom. "Why don't you take it easy, as I do?" said Hightowers; "what's the good of verses, for instance? A fellow never does verses after he leaves school. If you get complained of, it don't hurt you; and even a swishing, though it stings, it's only for a minute—I don't mind. There's a house match on to-day between Guerre's and Whiting's. Put that rubbish away and come along."

Val was on the point of going, when a recollection of what he had heard of his father's eminence in the way of verse-making returned to his mind; whereupon he sat down again doggedly to grind the smooth English into rugged schoolboy Latin. He clenched his teeth at the thought of being inferior

to his father—not from love—for how should he love the man who had not spent a kind word on him, or seen him, but once in his life?—but from a violent instinct of opposition which had sprung up in his soul, he could not tell why. He would not be beaten by his father; and this visionary jealousy overcame all Hightowers' philosophisings, and even the attractions of the match between Whiting's and Guerre's.

Thus the boy grew, not perhaps a very amiable boy, though with a side to his character which was as sweet and soft as the other was rugged; and with his grandfather's lesson well learned and bearing fruit. People who do right by a struggle are not so pleasant as those who do right because it comes natural to them—or even sometimes as those who do wrong in an easy and natural way without any effort; and when Val went home he would carry occasional traces of the conflict, and sometimes showed a chaotic condition of mind which disturbed the peace of his elders almost as much as it disturbed his own; and his career at school was of a mixed character, sometimes almost brilliant, sometimes very doubtful. What wild impulses would rise in him, longings for he knew not what, desires almost uncontrollable to rush away out of the routine in which his life was spent. Sometimes a fierce inclination to go to sea seized upon him; sometimes he would be suddenly tempted by the sight of the soldiers, of whom he saw so many, and for the moment the fancy of enlisting and going off unknown to India, China, or the end of the world, in search of adventures—a veritable knight-errant—moved the boy. But only himself knew how sudden and fierce were these temptations. He did not confide them to any one. He could not tell where they came from, not being learned enough or clever enough to refer them to his mother's vagrant blood, which stirred and rose in spring-tides and periodical overflowings with the rising of his youth. But his practical schoolboy life had this excellent effect, that it withdrew him from everything visionary, giving him only practical difficulties and temptations to struggle against. He forgot at Eton all about the other strange and jarring element in his existence which had perplexed him in his childhood. And, indeed, the boy had no leisure, even had he been disposed, to brood over his parentage, or ask himself why his father and mother were unlike those *paters* and *maters* of whom his companions talked. It was so; and what more could be said? He accepted the

fact without further questioning, and thought no more about it. He had enough to do with his schoolboy occupations, and with that high art in which he was being trained by all the influences round him—the art of mastering himself.

CHAPTER XV.

VAL had grown to be sixteen, tall and strong, towering far above the old lord, and even above his father, who had made another visit to Eskside, and had seen his son, and regarded him with more approval than he did when Val was seven years old. The older he grew, however, the less the boy resembled Richard, whose features, settling into middle age, no longer even resembled themselves—a thing which few people took into consideration. Many persons in the county expressed their surprise, indeed, on seeing them together, that they could ever have supposed Valentine to be like his father—without in the least perceiving that the Honourable Richard Ross, who was now Secretary of Legation in Florence, and had every chance of rising to the post of Ambassador the very next time that a wave of promotion came, was almost more unlike young Dick Ross, Lady Eskside's fair-haired boy. But Richard himself was very civil to his son, and inquired after his studies, and recounted his own Eton experiences, and volunteered advice about Oxford in a way which gratified all the family. The intercourse between the father and son was perfectly polite and civil, though, on Val's side at least, there was little warm feeling in it; but both took from this meeting a sentiment of satisfaction, not to say something like pride in each other. Valentine on his side perceived his father's easy superiority in culture and knowledge of the world to the rural magnates who formed society at Eskside, with a sense of increased consequence which is always agreeable; while Richard looked upon the handsome bold boy, the soft oval of whose boyish face was yet unmarred by any manly growth on lip or cheek, with a curious mingled feeling of pride in this being who belonged to himself, and repugnance to the creature who recalled so strongly

another image most unlike his own. Valentine possessed in a high degree that air of distinction which does not always accompany, as it ought, the highest birth. Beside him Lord Hightowers was as a ploughman, clumsy-footed, heavy-mannered, the very embodiment of the common in opposition to the refined. How did this come about? "Val is very like the picture of your grandfather—the Raeburn, as you call it ; though it would be more respectful to say the tenth lord," Lady Eskside said to her son, with a slight faltering. "To be a Raeburn is some distinction, but the tenth lord was nobody in particular," said the *dilettante*, ignoring the subject of the likeness. For, indeed, as he developed, Valentine was the handsomest Ross that had been seen on Eskside for generations, though the dark curls pushed off his bold forehead, and his great liquid eyes full of light, and his form, which was all spring and grace and elasticity, represented another race altogether than the lords of Eskside.

This was his age and this his appearance in the summer after his sixteenth birthday, when there happened to Val an encounter which affected all his future life, little as he thought of any such result. It was the middle of June, the height of the "summer half," that period of perfect blessedness to young Eton, a delicious evening "after six," when all the nine hundred boys that form the community were out and about in full enjoyment of their most perfect moment of leisure. The sun was setting up the river in purple and crimson, building a broad pathway as of molten gold, a celestial bridge up to the summer heavens, over the gleaming water ; the banks were gorgeous with summer flowers, thickets of the gay willow-herb, and yellow toad-flax, and great plumy feathers of the meadow-queen glowing in the evening light—the soft green of scattered willow-trees drooping above—and long beds of the tenderest blue forget-me-not dipping in and out of the stream. As if these did not supply colour enough, the whole breadth of the river was aglow with reflected tints from the sky, soft yellow, crimson, orange—great rosy clouds deepening into purple, and a soft vague vault of blue above with specks of tinted cloud, like scattered roses. The river was alive with boats. A little farther up, at Athens, the bathing-place, it was alive with something else—with shoals of boys bathing, plunging in and out, and peopling the shining stream with

bobbing heads and white shoulders, as plentiful as fishes and as much at their ease in the element, but using their human privilege of laughter to turn the spot into a Babel of noisy sweetness—noise which the charmed summer air took all roughness out of, and softened into gay music, tumultuous yet magical, in full accord with all the soft breathings of the waning day.

Val in his outrigger was lower down the stream, not much above the spot where the railway bridge does all that modern ugliness can to reduce nature to its own level. The boy was not thinking much about the beauty of the scene, yet he felt it, having a mind curiously open to all outdoor influences ; and this it was which had arrested his course in mid stream, just where he could see the glorious mass of the castle rising from the green foliage of the slopes, and the clustered red roofs of the homely town at its feet. The sunset threw its fullest radiance upon this wonderful termination of the landscape, which seemed, from where Val contemplated it, to stand across the stream, the light whitening here and there a window, and a golden haze of warmth and mellow distance enveloping the grey walls, the pinnacles of St George's, the picturesque broken outline of the Curfew tower. The animated foreground was full of boats—dragon-fly outriggers like his own, poising their long outstretched wings over the water—"tubs" full of laughing boys—and through the midst of all, the glorious vision of the Eight, with a well-known stalwart figure, as big as the boat in which he stood, steering the slim craft as it flew, and shouting stentorian correction and reproof to No. 4 and No. 7—for was not Henley in prospect, with all its chances of loss or triumph? Val withdrew towards the bank with a few strokes of his long oars, to get out of the way of that leviathan. As he stayed his boat again, with the sweetness of the evening, the light, the colour, the gay medley of sound floating in happy confusion into his mind—a gig, stumbling down stream in the hands of three or four laughing urchins, totally indifferent to the chances of a ducking, came suddenly foul of Val's boat, tossing his oar out of his hand, and upsetting him from his precarious vessel in a moment. Let not the gentle reader be dismayed ; there was neither fright nor rarity in the accident, nor the slightest occasion for the blue-coated waterman, with the Eton lilies on his silver buttons, who stood in a

punt at some distance with uplifted pole, relieved against the sunset sky, to hasten to the rescue. "Awfully sorry!" said all the small boys, rather envying Val the delight of being swamped; they were fresh and wet themselves from bathing, and would have liked nothing better than to swamp too. As for Valentine, he swam to the bank, which was close by, pulling his slim bark after him. He had as little clothing upon his handsome person as decency permitted—a white jersey, thin as a spider's web, and trousers turned up almost to the knee. So he was neither harmed nor alarmed, and might have walked back to the "rafts" and left his boat to be carried down by the stream without concerning himself about it, or seeking help to right it, had not his Fate commanded otherwise. But he had arrived at one of those moments in life, when Fate, potent and visible, except to the actors in the drama, does intervene.

It was, as I have said, the middle of June. Ascot races were lately over, and the roads, as careful housekeepers in lonely places knew but too well, were encumbered with "tramps," making their way from that great central event of their year to the lesser incidents of country fairs and provincial races. Many of these wandering parties were about,—so many, that they had ceased to be much remarked by quiet wayfarers. And, indeed, the poor tramps were quiet enough;—weatherbeaten groups, women with children in their weary arms, men with fur caps and knotted handkerchiefs, and those specimens of the doggish race which have vagrant written in every hair of their shabby coats, as it is inscribed in the hard brown lines, drawn tight by exposure to the weather, of their masters' faces. Two of these tramps were seated on a log of wood, resting, just opposite the spot where Valentine's boat had swamped. These were a woman and a boy, more decent than the majority of their kind, though noway separated from it in appearance. The woman looked over forty, but was not so old. She was seated, with her hands crossed listlessly in her lap, holding a little bundle in a coloured handkerchief; her dress was a dark cotton gown and a shawl, with an old-fashioned bonnet which came quite round the face, enclosing it like a frame—a fashion which no longer finds favour among women. This dark circle round her face identified it, and called the passenger's attention; and a more remarkable face has seldom caught and arrested the careless eye. I saw her about

this same time, seated on a bank in a leafy country road, with the light interlacing of shadow and sunshine over her; and as it was her aspect and looks which moved me to collect all these particulars, and trace out her history, and that of her children, I can speak still more distinctly of how she looked to me, than of her first appearance to Val. Complexion she had none. Her skin was burnt a kind of brick-dust colour, red-brown, and it was roughened by the exposure of years; her black hair was smoothed away on her forehead leaving only a little rim visible between the brow and the bonnet. Her features were beautiful, but only struck the spectator when he had looked at her more than once, the roughness of her aspect and colouring seeming to throw a veil upon their beauty of form. But it was her eyes and expression which were most remarkable, and fascinated the wondering glance. She looked like Silence personified—her lips shut close, as if they could not open, and an air of strange abstraction from the immediate scene enveloping and removing her from its common occurrences. The circles round her eyes were wide and large, and out of those worn sockets looked two great wistful eyes, always looking, never seeing anything—eyes unfathomable, which were full of solemn expression, yet told you nothing, except that there was much to tell. In her way the beauty of the night had entered into her inarticulate soul; but I do not think she was aware of any of the details that made it up—and she had not even noticed the incident of the swamping when Valentine's light well-strung figure scrambled up the bank. "Here, you!" cried Val to the boy by her side, with the ready ease of one accustomed to command to one accustomed to obey—"lend us a hand, will you, to empty the boat?"

The boy, who had been seated by the woman's side, rose at the call with ready reply to the demand upon him. He had the corresponding habit to Valentine's—the habit of hearing when he was called to, of doing what he was told to do. He had done everything to which a vagrant lad is bred—held horses, ran errands, executed a hundred odd jobs; and it did not occur to him to withhold the help by which sixpences were earned and bread gained, from any one who demanded it. "Here you are, sir," he answered, cheerily. He was about the same age as Valentine, but not so tall nor so finely made—a fair-haired, sunny-faced lad,

looking clean and ruddy, despite of dust and weariness, and the rough tramp costume, blue-spotted handkerchief, and nondescript jacket which he wore. He and his mother had been seated there together for some time past, not speaking to each other—for vagrants generally are a silent race. She did not stir even now, when he rose from her side. To have him called casually by whomsoever wanted help, and to see him obey, was habitual to her also. Val and the young tramp worked together in silence at the righting of the boat: they pulled it up on the bank, and turned it over, and set it afloat again. Then, however, Val changed his first intention. "I say," he began half meditatively, "have you time to take her down to Goodman's? no, you mustn't get in, you can tow her down; and if you'll come to me to-morrow morning I'll pay you. I'm Ross, at Grinder's. Do you know Grinder's? well, anybody will tell you. You can come after ten to-morrow; and tell old Goodman it's Ross's boat."

"Yes, sir, I'll see to it," said the boy blithely, touching his cap. He looked up with his fair frank face to Val's and the two lads "took a liking" to each other on the spot. Val had made a step or two down the bank, then came back. "What are you?" he said; "do you live here? I never saw you on the river before."

"Mother and I are going to stop the night," said the lad; "we're last from Ascot; I ain't got a trade, but just does odd jobs. No, I never was on the river before."

Upon which a sudden warmth of patronage and lordly benevolence came to Valentine's bosom. "If you stay here I'll give you what odd jobs I can. What's your name? I like the looks of you," said lordly Val.

"Dick Brown, sir; thank you, sir," said the lad, with grateful kindliness. He had no pride to be wounded by this brusque address, but took it in perfectly good part, and was gratified by the good impression he had made. He had tied a piece of string, which he brought from his own pocket, to the sharp prow of the boat, and was preparing to tow it down stream. But he stopped as Val stopped, still dripping, his wet shirt fitting to his fine well-developed form like a glove. The other had none of Val's physical advantages of education, any more than the mental. He was as ignorant of how to hold himself as how to make Latin verses; and had he got into the outrigger, as he at first proposed, would

have been by this time at the bottom of the river. He admired his handsome young patron with an innocent open-hearted pleasure in the sight of him, feeling him a hundred miles removed from and above himself.

"Very well," said Val; "you come to me to-morrow at Grinder's. If you stay we'll find you plenty to do."

Then he turned, bethinking himself of his wet clothes, which began to get chilly, and, with an amicable wave of his hand, stepped out along the road; but even then he paused again, and turned back to call out, "Remember Ross, at Grinder's," and with another nod disappeared. The woman behind had not been attending to the colloquy. She roused up suddenly at these last words, and looked after the boy, with her eyes lighting up strangely. "What did he say?" she asked, in a half whisper, rising quickly and coming to her son's side; "what was that name he said?"

"His own name, mother," said the smiling lad. "I am to go to him at ten to-morrow. He's one of the college gentlemen. He says he likes the looks of me, and I shouldn't wonder if he'd help me to a job."

"What was his name?" repeated the woman, grasping her son's arm impatiently. He took it with perfect calm, being accustomed to her moods.

"Come along, mother, I've to take the boat down to the raft; Ross, at Grinder's. I wonder where's Grinder's? He's Ross, I suppose?"

The woman stood with her hand on his arm, looking after the other figure which withdrew into the distance through the soft air, still tinted with all the rosy lights of sunset. The young athlete, all dripping in his scanty clothing, was joined by an admiring train as he went on; he was popular and well known, and his loyal followers worshipped him as much in this momentary eclipse as if he had done something famous. The tramp-woman was roused out of all the abstraction with which she had sat, oblivious of Valentine's closer presence, gazing vaguely at the sky and the river. Her eyes followed him with a hungry eagerness, devouring the space between; a slight nervous trembling ran through her frame.

"I wish I had seen him nigh at hand," she said, with a sigh; "it's my luck, always my luck."

"Come along and you'll see him still if you want to," said the lad, "I know what them swells do. They go down

to the rafts and takes off their wet things, and puts on their coats and chimney-pots. He's a good un to look at, I can tell you ; but you never see nothing that's under your nose, mother. You get curious-like when anything's past."

"Don't stand talking," said the woman with a tremulous impatience, "but come on."

Dick obeyed promptly ; but it is not so easy to walk quickly, towing a troublesome outrigger with its projecting rowlocks, when there is no one in it to guide its course along the inequalities of the bank. The woman bore this delay with nervous self-restraint as long as she could, then telling him she would wait for him, pursued her way rapidly alone to the rafts, which were crowded by boys arriving and departing in every possible stage of undress. She waited wistfully at the gate, not venturing to enter the railed-off enclosure, which was sacred to the boats and "the gentlemen ;" and when Val issued forth in correct Eton dress, she did not recognise him. She stood there in tremulous and passionate agitation—suppressed, it is true, but intense—gazing wistfully at the crowds of moving figures, all bearing that resemblance to each other which boys undergoing the same training and wearing the same dress so often do. She could not identify any one, and she was growing sick and faint with weariness, and with the beating of her heart.

"Here I am, mother ; did you see him ?" said Dick, appearing at last, tired but pleased, with his awkward charge.

"How was I to know him ?" she asked, sharply ; "I did not see his face. As to who he is, Dick, it's a name I once knew. I wish I had seen him ; but it's my luck, always my luck."

"I'll ask all about him, mother," said the cheery boy ; but while he was gone to deposit the boat, some other members of their wandering class joined the woman, and distracted, or did their best to distract, her attention. With them she made a long round by the bridge to the Windsor side—(there was a ferry, but pennies are pennies, and were not to be lightly spent on personal ease)—and then made her way to a lodging she knew in the vagrant quarter—the Rag Fair, of the little royal borough. Whatever might be the thoughts that were passing in her mind, or whatever the anxieties within her hidden heart, she had to give her attention to the practical side of her rough life, and stopped on

her way to buy some scraps of meat and some bread for her own and her son's meal. There was a common fire in the lower room of the lodging-house, at which the tramp-lodgers were allowed to cook their supper. This woman did so in her turn, like the rest ; and to Dick the scraps which his mother had cooked, as well as she knew how, made a luxurious meal, taken on a corner of the rough table, with all the sounds and all the smells of Coffin Lane coming in at the open door. There was a Babel of sounds going on within in addition, each group talking according to its pleasure, and the outdoor shouting, jesting, quarrelling, coming in as chorus. Dick had not found out very much about his young patron. He told his mother that he had summut to do with a lord, but was not sure what. "But why can't we stay here a bit ?" said Dick. "There ain't nothing going on in the country but poor things, where we don't pick up enough to keep body and soul together ; you'll see I'll make something handsome on the river, with all the odd jobs there is ; and if this here young gentleman is as good as his word——"

"Did he look as if he would be as good as his word ?"

"Lord bless us, how can I tell ?" said Dick. "I don't read faces, nor fortunes neither, like you. He said he liked the looks of me ; and so did I," the lad added, with a laugh. "I hope it'll do him a deal of good. I like the looks of him too."

And Dick went to bed in the room which he shared (under Government regulation and with great regard to the cubic feet of air—such air as is to be had in Coffin Lane) with two other rough fellows not so guiltless in their vagrancy as himself—with a cheery heart, thinking that here, perhaps, he had found foundation enough to build a life upon—a beginning to his career, if he had known such an imposing word. He was a good boy, though his previous existence had been spent among the roughest elements of society. He knelt down boldly at his bedside, and said the short half-childish prayer which he had been taught as a child, without caring in the least for his companions' jeers. Perhaps even it was more a charm against evil than a prayer ; but, such as it was, the boy held by it bravely. He was exhilarated somehow, and full of hope, he could not have told why. Something good seemed about to happen to him. I do not know what he expected Valentine to do for him, or if he expected

anything definite ; but he was somehow inspired and elated, he could not tell why.

His mother, for her part, sat down upon her bed and pondered, her abstract eyes fixing upon the bare whitewashed walls as solemn a gaze as that which she had fixed on the distant glow of the sunset across the river. They were not eyes which could see anything near at hand, but were always far off, watching something visionary, more true than the reality before her. She, too, had companions in her room, where there was nothing beyond the supply of bare necessities—a bed to sleep on, nothing more. She had not Dick's happy temperament, though she was as indifferent as he was to the base surroundings of that poor and low level of life to which they were accustomed ; but somehow, in her mind too, various new thoughts, or rather old thoughts, which were new by reason of long disuse, were surging up whether she would or not. Perhaps it was the sound of the name which she had not heard for years. Ross. It was not a very uncommon name ; but yet, when this poor creature began to think who the boy whom she had seen might be—and to wonder with quick-beating pulses whether it was so—these thoughts were enough to fill her heart with such wild throbs and bursts of feeling as had not stirred it for many years.

CHAPTER XVI.

DICK BROWN got up very early next morning, with the same sense of exhilaration and light-heartedness which had moved him on the previous night. To be sure he had no particular reason for it, but what of that ? People are seldom so truly happy as when they are happy without any cause. He was early in his habits, and his heart was too gay to be anything but restless. He got up though it was not much past five o'clock, and took his turn at the pump in the yard, which formed the entire toilet arrangements of the tramps' lodging-house, and then strolled down with his hands in his pockets and his ruddy countenance shining fresh from these ablutions to where the river shone blue in the morning sunshine at the

foot of Coffin Lane. Dick had passed through Windsor more than once in the course of his checkered existence. He had been here with his tribe—those curious unenjoying slaves of pleasure who are to be found wherever there is merrymaking, little as their share may be in the mirth—on the 4th of June, the great *fête* day of Eton, and on the occasion of reviews in the great Park, and royal visits; so the place was moderately familiar to him, as so many places were all over the country. He strolled along the raised path by the water-side, with a friendly feeling for the still river, sparkling in the still sunshine, without boat or voice to break its quiet, which he thought to himself had “brought him luck,” a new friend, and perhaps a long succession of odd jobs. Dick and his mother did very fairly on the whole in their wandering life. The shillings and sixpences which they picked up in one way or another kept them going, and it was very rare when they felt want. But the boy’s mind was different from his fate; he was no adventurer—and though habit had made the road and his nomadic outdoor life familiar to him, yet he had never taken to them quite kindly. The thing of all others that filled him with envy was one of those little tidy houses or pretty cottages which abound in every English village, or even on the skirts of a small town, with a little flower-garden full of flowers, and pictures on the walls inside. The lad had said to himself times without number, that there indeed was something to make life sweet—a settled home, a certain place where he should rest every night and wake every morning. There was no way in his power by which he could attain to such a glorious conclusion; but he thus secured what is the next best thing to success in this world, a distinct conception of what he wanted, an ideal which was possible and might be carried out.

Dick sat down upon the bank, swinging his feet over the mass of gravel which the workmen, beginning their morning work, were fishing up out of the river, and contemplated the scene before him, which, but for them, would have been noiseless as midnight. The irregular wooden buildings which flanked the rafts opposite looked picturesque in the morning light, and the soft water rippled up to the edge of the planks, reflecting everything,—pointed roof and lattice window, and the wonderful assembly of boats. It was not hot so early in the morning; and even had it been hot, the

very sight of that placid river, sweeping in subdued silvery tints, cooled down from all the pictorial warmth and purple glory of the evening, must have cooled and refreshed the landscape. The clump of elm-trees on the Brocas extended all their twinkling leaflets to the light ; lower down, a line of white houses, with knots of shrubs and stunted trees before each attracted Dick's attention. Already lines of white clothes put up to dry betrayed at once the occupation and the industry of the inhabitants. If only his mother was of that profession, or could adopt it, Dick thought to himself,—how sweet it would be to live there, with the river at hand and the green meadow-grass between—to live there for ever and ever, instead of wandering and tramping about the dusty roads !

There was no dust anywhere on that clear fresh morning. The boy made no comment to himself upon the still beauty of the scene. He knew nothing of the charm of reflection and shadow, the soft tones of the morning brightness, the cool green of the grass ; he could not have told why they were beautiful, but he felt it somehow, and all the sweetness of the early calm. The great cart-horse standing meditative on the water's edge, with its head and limbs relieved against the light sky ; the rustling of the gravel as it was shovelled up, all wet and shining upon the bank ; the sound of the workmen's operations in the heavy boat from which they were working,—gave a welcome sense of "company" and fellowship to the friendly boy ; and for the rest, his soul was bathed in the sweetness of the morning. After a while he went higher up the stream and bathed more than his soul—his body too, which was much the better for the bath ; and then came back again along the Brocas, having crossed in the punt by which some early workmen went to their occupation, pondering many things in his mind. If a fellow could get settled work now here—a fellow who was not so fortunate as to have a mother who could take in washing ! Dick extended his arms as he walked, and stretched himself, and felt able for a man's work, though he was only sixteen—hard work, not light—a good long day, from six in the morning till six at night ; what did he care how hard the work was, so long as he was off the road, and had some little nook or corner of his own—he did not even mind how tiny—to creep into, and identify as his, absolutely his, and not another's ? The cottages facing to the Brocas were too fine and too grand for his aspirations. Short of the ambitious way of taking in

washing, he saw no royal road to such comfort and splendour ; but homelier places no doubt might be had. What schemes were buzzing in his young head as he walked back towards Coffin Lane ! He had brought out a hunch of bread with him, which his mother had put aside last night, and which served for breakfast, and satisfied him fully. He wanted no delicacies of a spread table, and dreams of hot coffee did not enter his mind. On winter mornings, doubtless, it was tempting when it was to be had in the street, and pennies were forthcoming ; but it would have been sheer extravagance on such a day. The bread was quite enough for all Dick's need ; but his mind was busy with projects ambitious and fanciful. He went back to the lodging-house to find his mother taking the cup of weak tea without milk which was her breakfast ; and, as it was still too early to go to his appointment with Val, begged her to come out with him that he might talk to her ; there was no accommodation for private talk in the tramps' lodging-house, although most of the inmates by this time were gone upon their vagrant course. Dick took his mother out by the river-side again, and led her to a grassy bank above the gravel-heap and the workmen, where the white houses on the Brocas, and the waving lines of clean linen put out to dry, were full in sight. He began the conversation cunningly with this practical illustration of his discourse before his eyes.

“ Mother,” said Dick, “ did you never think as you'd like to try staying still in one place and getting a little bit of a home ? ”

“ No, Dick,” said the woman, hastily ; “ don't ask me—I couldn't do it. It would kill me if I were made to try.”

“ No one ain't a going to make you,” said Dick, soothingly ; “ but look here, mother—now tell me, didn't you ever try ? ”

“ Oh yes, I've tried—tried hard enough—till I was nigh dead of it—”

“ I can't remember, mother.”

“ It was before your time,” she said, with a sigh and uneasy movement—“ before you were born.”

Dick did not put any further questions. He had never asked anything about his father. A tramp's life has its lessons as well as a lord's, and Dick was aware that it was not always expedient to inquire into the life, either public or private, of your predecessors. He had not the least

notion that there had been anything particular about his father, but took it for granted that he must have been such a one as Joe or Jack, in rough coat and knotted handkerchief, a wanderer like the rest. He accepted the facts of existence as they stood without making any difficulties, and therefore he did not attempt to "worrif" his mother by further reference to the past, which evidently did "worrif" her. "Well, never mind that," he said; "you shan't never be forced to anything if I can help it. But if so be as I got work, and it was for my good to stay in a place—supposing it might be here?"

"Here's different," said his mother, dreamily.

"That's just what I think," cried Dick, too wise to ask why; "it's a kind of a place where a body feels free like, where you can be gone to-morrow if you please—the forest handy and Ascot handy, and barges as will give you a lift the moment as you feel it the right thing to go. That's just what I wanted to ask you, mother. If I got a spell of work along of that young swell as I'm going to see, or anything steady, mightn't we try? If you felt on the go any day, you might just take the road again and no harm done; or if you felt as you could sit still and make yourself comfortable in the house——"

"I could never sit still and make myself comfortable," she said; "I can't be happy out of the air, Dick—I can't breathe; and sitting still was never my way—nor you couldn't do it neither," she added, looking in his face.

"Oh, couldn't I though?" said Dick, with a laugh. "Mother, you don't know much about me. I am not one to grumble, I hope—but if you'll believe me, the thing I'd be proudest of would be to be bound 'prentis and learn a trade."

"Dick!"

"I thought you'd be surprised. I know I'm too old now, and I know it's no good wishing," said the boy. "Many and many's the time I've lain awake of nights thinking of it; but I saw as it wasn't to be done nohow, and never spoke. I've give up that free and full, mother, and never bothered you about what couldn't be; so you won't mind if I bother a bit now. If I could get a long spell of work, mother dear! There's them men at the gravel, and there's a deal of lads like me employed about the rafts; and down at Eton they're wanted in every corner, for the fives-courts and the rackets,

and all them things. Now supposing as this young swell has took a fancy to me, like I have to him—and supposing as I get work—let's say supposing, for it may never come to nothing,—wouldn't you stay with me a bit, mother, and try and make a home?"

"I'd like to see the gentleman, Dick," said his mother, ignoring his appeal.

"The gentleman!" said the boy, a little disappointed. And then he added, cheerily—"Well, mother dear, you shall see the gentleman, partickler if you'll stay here a bit, and I have regular work, and we get a bit of an 'ome."

"He would never come to your home, lad—not the likes of him."

"You think a deal of him, mother. He mightn't come to Coffin Lane; I daresay as the gentlemen in college don't let young swells go a-visiting there. But you take my word, you'll see him; for he's taken a fancy to me, I tell you. There's the quarter afore ten chiming. I must be off now, mother; and if anything comes in the way you'll not go against me? not when I've set my heart on it, like this?"

"I'll stay—a bit—to please you, Dick," said the woman. And the lad sprang up and hastened away with a light heart. This was so much gained. He went quickly down, walking on through the narrow High Street of Eton to the great red house in which his new friend was. Grinder's was an institution in the place, the most important of all the Eton boarding-houses, though only a dame's, not a master's house. The elegant young Grinder, who was Val's tutor, was but a younger branch of this exalted family, and had no immediate share in the grandeurs of the establishment, which was managed by a dominie or dame, a lay member of the Eton community, who taught nothing, but only superintended the meals and morals of his great houseful of boys. Such personages have no place in Eton proper—the Eton of the Reformation period, so to speak—but they were very important in Val's time. Young Brown went to a side door, and asked for Mr Ross with a little timidity. He was deeply conscious of the fact that he was nothing but "a cad"—not a kind of visitor whom either dame or tutor would permit "one of the gentlemen" to receive; and, indeed, I think Dick would have been sent ignominiously away but for his frank and open countenance,

and the careful washing, both in the river and out of it, which he had that morning given himself. He was told to wait ; and he waited, noting, with curious eyes, the work of the great house which went on under his eyes, and asking himself how he would like to be in the place of the young curly-headed footman who was flying about through the passages, up-stairs and down, on a hundred errands ; or the other aproned functionary who was visible in a dark closet at a distance, cleaning knives with serious persistence, as if life depended on it. Dick decided that he would not like this mode of making his livelihood. He shrank even from the thought—I cannot tell why, for he had no sense of pride, and knew no reason why he should not have taken service in Grinder's, where the servants, as well as the other inmates, lived on the fat of the land, and wanted for nothing ; but somehow his fancy was not attracted by such a prospect. He watched the cleaner of knives, and the curly-headed footman in his livery, with interest ; but not as he watched the lads on the river, whose life was spent in launching boats and withdrawing them from the water in continual succession. He had no pride ; and the livery and the living were infinitely more comfortable than anything he had ever known. "His mind did not go with it," he said to himself ; and that was all it was necessary to say.

While he was thus meditating, Valentine Ross, in correct Eton costume—black coat, high hat, and white necktie—fresh from his tutor, with books under his arm, came in, and spied him where he stood waiting. Val's face lightened up into pleased recognition,—more readily than Dick's did, who was slow to recognise in this solemn garb the figure which he had seen in undress dripping from the water. "Hollo, Brown!" said Val ; "I am glad you have kept your time. Come up-stairs and I'll give you what I promised you." Dick followed his patron up-stairs, and through a long passage to Val's room. "Come in," said Val, rummaging in a drawer of his bureau for the half-crown with which he meant to present his assistant of last night. Dick entered timidly, withdrawing his cap from his head. The room was quite small, the bed folded up, as is usual at Eton. The bureau, or writing-desk with drawers adorned by a red-velvet shelf on the top, stood in one corner, and a set of book-shelves similarly decorated in another ; a heterogeneous collection of pictures, hung as closely as possible, the

accumulation of two years, covered the wall ; some little carved brackets of stained wood held little plaster figures, not badly modelled, in which an Italian image-seller drove a brisk trade among the boys. A blue-and-black coat, in bright stripes (need I add that Val—august distinction—was in the Twenty-Two), topped by a cap of utterly different but equally bright hues—the colours of the house—hung on the door ; a fine piece of colour, if perhaps somewhat violent in contrast. The window was full of bright geraniums, which grew in a box outside, and garlanded with the yellow canariensis and wreaths of sweet-peas. Dick looked round upon all these treasures, his heart throbbing with admiration, and something that would have been envy had it been possible to hope or wish for anything so beautiful and delightful for himself ; but as this was not possible, the boy's heart swelled with pleasure that his young patron should possess it, which was next best.

"Wait a moment," cried Val, finding, as he pursued his search, a note laid upon his bureau, which had been brought in in his absence ; and Dick stood breathless, gazing round him, glad of the delay, which gave him time to take in every detail of this schoolboy palace into his mind. The note was about some momentous piece of business,—the domestic economy of that one of "the boats" in which Val rowed number seven, with hopes of being stroke when Jones left next Election. He bent his brows over it, and seizing paper and pen, wrote a hasty answer, for such important business cannot wait. Dick, watching his movements, felt with genuine gratification that here was another commission for him. But his patron's next step made his countenance fall, and filled his soul with wonder. Val opened his door, and with stentorian voice shouted "Lower boy !" into the long passage. There was a momentary pause, and then steps were heard in all directions up and down, rattling over the bare boards, and about half-a-dozen young gentlemen in a lump came tumbling into the room. Val inspected them with lofty calm, and held out his note to the last comer, over the heads of the others. "Take this to Benton at Guerre's," he said, with admirable brevity ; and immediately the messenger departed, the little crowd melted away, and the two boys were again alone.

"I say, I mustn't keep you here," said Val ; "my dame mightn't like it. Here's your half-crown. Have you got

anything to do yet? I think you're a handy fellow, and I shouldn't mind saying a word for you if I had the chance. What kind of place do you want?"

"I don't mind what it is," said Dick. "I'd like a place at the rafts awful, if I was good enough; or anything, sir. I don't mind, as long as I can make enough to keep me—and mother; that's all I care."

"Was that your mother?" said Val. "Do you work for her too?"

"Well, sir, you see she can make a deal in our old way. She is a great one with the cards when she likes, but she won't never do it except when we're hard up and she's forced; for she says she has to tell the things she sees, and they always comes true: but what I want is to stay in one place, and get a bit of an 'ome together—and she ain't good for gentlemen's washing or that sort, worse luck," said Dick, regretfully. "So you see, sir, if she stays still to please me, I'll have to work for her, and good reason. She's been a good mother to me, never going on the loose, nor that, like other women do. I don't grudge my work."

Val did not understand the curious tingling that ran through his veins. He was not consciously thinking of his own mother, but yet it was something like sympathy that penetrated his sensitive mind. "I wish I could help you," he said, doubtfully. "I'd speak to the people at the rafts, but I don't know if they'd mind me. I'll tell you what, though," he added, with sudden excitement. "I can do better than that—I'll get Lichen to speak to them! They might not care for me—but they'll mind what Lichen says."

Dick received reverentially and gratefully, but without understanding the full grandeur of the idea, this splendid promise—for how should the young tramp have known, what I am sure the reader must divine, that Lichen was that Olympian demigod and king among men, the Captain of the Boats? If Lichen had asked the Queen for anything, I wonder if her Majesty would have had the courage to refuse him? but at all events nobody about the river dared to say him nay. To be spoken to by Lichen was, to an ordinary mortal, distinction enough to last him half his (Eton) days. Dick did not see the magnificence of the prospect thus opened to him, but Val knew all that was implied in it, and his countenance brightened all over. "I don't think they can refuse Lichen anything," he said. "Look here, Brown;

meet us at the rafts after six, and I'll tell you what is done. I wish your mother would tell me my fortune. Lots of fellows would go to her if they knew; but then the masters wouldn't like it, and there might be a row."

"Bless you, sir, mother wouldn't—not for the Bank of England," cried Dick. "She might tell *you* yours, if I was to ask her. Thank you kindly, sir; I'll be there as sure as life. It's what I should like most."

"If Lichen speaks for you, you'll get it," said Val; "and I know Harry wants boys. You're a good boy, ain't you?" he added, looking at him closely—"you look it. And mind, if we recommend you, and you're found out to be rowdy or bad after, and disgrace us, Lichen will give you such a licking? Or for that matter, I'll do it myself."

"I'm not afraid," said Dick. "I ain't rowdy; and if I get a fixed place and a chance of making a home, you just try me, and see if I'll lose my work for the sake of pleasure. I ain't that sort."

"I don't believe you are," said Val; "only it's right I should warn you; for Lichen ain't a fellow to stand any nonsense, and no more am I. Do you think that's pretty? I'm doing it, but I haven't the time."

This was said in respect to a piece of wood-carving, which Valentine had begun in the beginning of the year, and which lay there, like many another enterprise commenced, gathering dust, but approaching no nearer to completion. Dick surveyed it with glowing eyes.

"I saw some like it in a shop as I came down. Oh, how I should like to try! I've cut things myself out of a bit of wood with an old knife, and sold them at the fair."

"And you think you could do this without any lessons?" said Val, laughing; "just take and try it. I wonder what old Fullady would say? there are the saws and things. But look here, you'll have to go, for it's time for eleven o'clock school. Take the whole concern with you, quick, and I'll give you five bob if you can finish it. Remember after six, at the rafts to-night."

Thus saying, the young patron pushed his *protégé* before him out of the room, laden with the wood-carving, and rushed off himself with a pile of books under his arm. All the boys in the house seemed flooding out, and all the boys in Eton to be pouring in different directions, one stream intersecting another, as Dick issued forth filled with delight

and hope. He had not a corner to which he could take the precious bit of work he had been intrusted with—nothing but the common room of the tramps' lodging-house. Oh for a "home," not so grand as Val's little palace, but anything that would afford protection and quiet—a place to decorate and pet like a child ! This feeling grew tenfold stronger in Dick's heart as he sat wistfully on the river's bank, and looked across at the rafts, in which were sublime possibilities of work and wages. How he longed for the evening ! How he counted the moments as the day glowed through its mid hours, and the sun descended the western sky, and the hour known in these regions as "after six" began to come down softly on Eton and the world !

CHAPTER XVII.

DICK's mother sat upon the bank where he had left her, with her hands clasping her knees, and her abstract eyes gazing across the river into the distance, seeing scarcely anything before her, but seeing much which was not before her nor could be. A tramp has no room to sit in, no domestic duties to do, even were she disposed to do them ; and to sit thus in a silent musing, or without even musing at all, in mere empty leisure, beaten upon by wind and sun, was as characteristic of her wandering life as were the long fatigues of the road along which at other times she would plod for hours, or the noisy tumult of racecourse or fair through which she often carried her serious face and abstract eyes—a figure always remarkable and never having any visible connection with the scene in which she was. But this day she was as she had not been for years. The heart which fulfilled its ordinary pulsations in her breast calmly and dully on most occasions, like something far off and scarcely belonging to her, was now throbbing high with an emotion which influenced every nerve and fibre of her frame. It had never stilled since last night when she heard Val's name sounding clear through the sunny air, and saw the tall well-formed boy, with his wet jersey clinging to his shoulders, moving swiftly away from her, a vision, but more

substantial than any other vision. Her old heart, the heart of her youth, had leaped back into life at that moment; and instead of the muffled beating of the familiar machine which had simply kept her alive all these years, a something full of independent life, full of passion, and eagerness, and quick-coming fancies, and hope, and fear, had suddenly come to life within her bosom. I don't know if her thoughts were very articulate. They could scarcely have been so, uneducated, untrained, undisciplined soul as she was—a creature ruled by impulses, and with no hand to control her; but as she sat there and saw her placid Dick go happily off, to meet the other lad who was to him "a young swell," able to advance and help him, one to whom he had taken a sudden fancy, he could not tell why,—the strangeness of the situation roused her to an excitement which she was incapable of subduing. It mayn't be him after all—it mayn't be him after all," she said to herself, watching Dick till he disappeared into the distance. She would have given all she had (it was not much) to go with him, and look face to face upon the other. It seemed to her that she must know at the first glance whether it was *him* or not. But, indeed, she had no doubt that it was *him*. For I do not attempt to make any pretence at deceiving the well-informed and quick-sighted reader, who knows as well as I do who this woman was. She had carried on her wandering life, the life which she had chosen, for the last eight years, exposed to all the vicissitudes of people in her condition, sometimes in want, often miserable, pursuing in her wild freedom a routine as mechanically fixed as that of the most rigid conventional life, and bound, had she known it, by as unyielding a lacework of custom as any that could have affected the life of the Honourable Mrs Richard Ross, the wife of the Secretary of Legation. But she did not know this, poor soul; and besides, all possibility of that other existence, all hold upon it or thought of it, had disappeared out of her horizon for sixteen years.

Sixteen years! a large slice out of a woman's life who had not yet done more than pass the half-way milestone of human existence. She had never possessed so much even of the merest rudimentary education as to know what the position of Richard Ross's wife meant, except that it involved living in a house, wearing good clothes, and being surrounded by people of whom she was frightened, who did

not understand her, and whom she could not understand. Since her flight back into her natural condition, the slow years had brought to her maturing mind thoughts which she understood as little. She was not more educated, more clever, nor indeed more clear in her confused fancies, than when she gave back one of her boys, driven thereto by a wild sense of justice, into his father's keeping ; but many strange things had seemed to pass before her dreamy eyes since then,—things she could not fathom, vague visions of what might have been right, of what was wrong. These had come to little practical result, except in so far that she had carefully preserved her boy Dick from contact with the evil around—had trained him in her way to truth and goodness and some strange sense of honour—had got him even a little education, the faculties of reading and writing, which were to herself a huge distinction among her tribe ; and by keeping him in her own dreamy and silent but pure companionship, had preserved the lad from moral harm.

She had however, in doing this, a material to work upon which had saved her much trouble. The boy was, to begin with, of a character as incomprehensible to her as were the other vague and strange influences which had shaped her shipwrecked life. He was good, gentle, more advanced than herself, his teacher, in the higher things which she tried to teach him, getting by instinct to conclusions which only painfully and dimly had forced themselves upon her, not subject to the temptations which she expected to move him, not lawless, nor violent, nor hard to control, but full of reason and sense and steady trustworthiness from his cradle. She had by this time got over the surprise with which she had slowly come to recognise in Dick a being totally different from herself. She was no analyst of character, and she had accepted the fact with dumb wonder which did not know how to put itself into words. Even now there awaited her many lesser surprises, as Dick, going on from step to step in life, did things which it never would have occurred to her to do, and showed himself totally impervious to those temptations against which it had been necessary for her to struggle. His last declaration to her was as surprising as anything that went before it. The nomad's son, who had been "on the tramp" all his life, whose existence had been spent "on the road," alternating between the noisy excitement of those scenes of

amusement which youth generally loves, and that dull semi-hibernation of the winter which gives the tramp so keen a zest for the new start of spring,—was it the boy so bred who had spoken to her of a “honie,” of steady work, and the commonplace existence of a man who had learned a trade? She wondered with a depth of vague surprise which it would be impossible to put into words—for she herself had no words to express what she meant. Had it not happened to chime in with the longing in her own mind to stay here and see the other boy, whose momentary contact had filled her with such excitement, I don’t know how she would have received Dick’s strange proposal; but in her other agitation it passed without more than an additional but temporary shock of that surprise which Dick constantly gave her; and she did not count the cost of the concession she had made to him—the tacit agreement she had come under to live under a commonplace roof, and confine herself to indoor life during this flush of midsummer weather—for the longing that she had to know something, if only as a distant spectator, of the life and being of that other boy.

After a while she roused herself and went over in the ferry-boat to the other side of the river, where were “the rafts” to which Dick looked with so much anxiety and hope. Everything was very still on the rafts at that sunny hour before mid-day, when Eton, shut up in its schoolrooms, did its construing drowsily, and dreamed of the delights of “after twelve” without being able to rush forth and anticipate them. The attendants on the rafts, lightly-clad, softly-stepping figures, in noiseless boating shoes, and such imitation of boating costume as their means could afford, were lounging about with nothing to do, seated on the rails drawling in dreary Berkshire speech, or arranging their boats in readiness for the approaching rush. Dick’s mother approached along the road, without attracting any special observation, and got into conversation with one or two of the men with the ease which attends social intercourse on these levels of life. “If there is a new hand wanted, my lad is dreadful anxious to come,” she said. “Old Harry’s looking for a new lad,” answered the man she addressed. And so the talk began.

“There was a kind of an accident on the river last night,” she said, after a while; “one of the gentlemen got his boat upset, and my lad brought it down——”

"Lord bless you! call that a haccident?" said her informant; "half-a-dozen of 'em swamps every night. They don't mind, nor nobody else."

"The name of this one was—Ross, I think," she said, very slowly; "maybe you'll know him?"

"I know him well enough—he's in the Victory; not half a bad fellow in his way, but awful sharp, and not a bit of patience. I seed him come in dripping wet. He's free with his money, and I daresay he'd pay your lad handsome. If I were you I'd speak to old Harry himself about the place; and if you say you've a friend or two among them young swells, better luck."

"Is this one what you call a swell?" said the woman.

"Why, he's *Mr* Ross, ain't he? that's Eton for honourable," said one of the men.

"*He* ain't *Mr* Ross," said an older and better-informed person, with some contempt. The older attendants at the rafts were walking peerages, and knew everybody's pedigree. "His father was *Mister* Ross, if you please. He used to be at college in my time; a nice light-haired sort of a lad, not good for much, but with heaps of friends. Not half the pluck of this one; this one's as dark as you, missis, a kind of a foreign-looking blade, and as wilful as the old gentleman himself. But I like that sort better than the quiet ones; the quiet ones does just as much mischief on the sly."

"They're a rare lot, them lads are," said the other—"shouting at a man like's he was the dust under their feet. Ain't we their fellow-creatures all the same? It ain't much you makes at the rafts, missis, even if you gains a lot in the season. For after all, look how short the season is—you may say just the summer half. It's too cold in March, and it's too cold in October—nothing to speak of but the summer half. You makes a good deal while it lasts, I don't say nothing to the contrary—but what's that to good steady work all round the year?"

"Maybe her lad isn't one for steady work," said another. "It *is* work, I can tell you is this, as long as it lasts; from early morning to lock-up, never a moment to draw your breath, except school-hours; and holidays, and half-holidays without end. Then there's the regular boating gents as come and go, not constant like the Eton gentlemen. They give a deal of trouble—they do; and as particular with their boats as if they were babies. I tell you what, missis, if you

want him to have an easy place, I wouldn't send him here."

"He's not one that's afraid of work," said the woman, "and it's what he's set his heart on. I wonder if you could tell me where this Mr Ross comes from?—if he's west-country now, down Devonshire way?"

"Bless you, no!" said the old man, who was great in genealogies; "he's from the north, he is—Scotland or thereabouts. His grandfather came with him when he first came to college—Lord something or other. About as like a lord as I am. But the nobility ain't much to look at," added this functionary, with whom familiarity had bred contempt. "They're a poor lot them Scotch and Irish lords. Give me a good railway man, or that sort; they're the ones for spending their money. Lord—I cannot think on the old un's name."

"Was it—Eskside?"

"You're a nice sort of body to know about the aristocracy," said the man; "in course it was Eskside. Now, missis, if you knowed, what was the good of coming asking me, taking a fellow in?"

"I didn't know," said the woman, humbly; "I only wanted to know. In my young days, long ago, I knew—a family of that name."

"Ay, ay, in your young days! You were a handsome lass then, I'll be bound," said the old man, with a grin.

"Look here," said one of the others—"here's old Harry coming, if you like to speak to him about your lad. Speak up and don't be frightened. He ain't at all a bad sort, and if you tell him as the boy's spry and handy, and don't mind a hard day's work—Speak up! only don't say I told you." And the benevolent adviser disappeared hastily, and began to pull about some old gigs which were ranged on the rafts, as if much too busily occupied to spare a word. The woman went up to the master with a heart beating so strongly that she could scarcely hear her own voice. On any other occasion she would have been shy and reluctant. Asking favours was not in her way—she did not know how to do it. She could not feign or compliment, or do anything to ingratiate herself with a patron. But her internal agitation was so strong that she was quite uplifted beyond all sense of the effort which would have been so trying to her on any other occasion. She went up to him sustained by her excitement,

which at the same time blunted her feelings, and made her almost unaware of the very words she uttered.

"Master," she said, going straight to the point, as the excited mind naturally does—"I have a boy that is very anxious for work. He is a good lad, and very kind to me. We've been tramping about the country—nothing better, for all my folks was in that way; but he don't take after me and my folks. He thinks steady work is better, and to stay still in one place."

"He is in the right of it there," was the reply.

"Maybe he is in the right," she said; "I'm not the one to say, for I'm fond of my freedom and moving about. But, master, you'll have one in your place that is not afraid of hard work if you'll have my son."

"Who is your son? do I know him?" said the master, who was a man with a mobile and clean-shaven countenance, like an actor, with a twinkling eye and a suave manner, the father of an athletic band of river worthies who were regarded generally with much admiration by "the college gentlemen," to whom their prowess was well known,—"who is your son?"

The woman grew sick and giddy with the tumult of feeling in her. The words were simple enough in straightforward meaning; but they bore another sense, which made her heart flutter, and took the very light from her eyes. "Who was her son?" It was all she could do to keep from betraying herself, from claiming some one else as her son, very different from Dick. If she had done so, she would have been simply treated as a mad woman: as it was, the bystanders, used to tramps of a very different class, looked at her with instant suspicion, half disposed to attribute her giddiness and faltering to a common enough cause. She mastered herself without fully knowing either the risk she had run or the looks directed to her. "You don't know him," she said. "We came here but last night. One of the college gentlemen was to speak for him. He's a good hard-working lad, if you'll take my word for it, that knows him best."

"Well, missis, it's true as you knows him best; but I don't know as we can take his mother's word for it. Mothers ain't always to be trusted to tell what they know," said the master, good-humouredly. "I'll speak to you another time, for the gentlemen are coming. Look sharp, lads."

“ All right, sir ; here you are.”

The tide was coming in—a tide of boys—who immediately flooded the place, pouring up-stairs into the dressing-rooms to change their school garments for boating dress, and gradually occupying the rafts in a moving restless crowd. The woman stood, jostled by the living stream, watching wistfully, while boat after boat shot out into the water,—gigs, with a laughing, restless crew—outriggers, each with a silent inmate, bent on work and practice ; for all the school races had yet to be rowed. She stood gazing, with a heart that fluttered wildly, upon all those unknown young faces and animated moving figures. One of them was bound to her by the closest tie that can unite two human creatures ; and yet, poor soul, she did not know him, nor had he the slightest clue to find her out—to think of her as anyhow connected with himself. Her heart grew sick as she gazed and gazed, pausing now upon one face, now upon another. There was one of whom she caught a passing glimpse, as he pushed off into the stream in one of the long-winged dragon-fly boats, who excited her most of all. She could not see him clearly, only a glimpse of him between the crowding figures about ;—an oval face, with dark clouds of curling hair pushed from his forehead. There came a ringing in her ears, a dimness in her eyes. Women in her class do not faint except at the most tremendous emergencies. If they did, they would probably be set down as intoxicated, and summarily dealt with. She caught at the wooden railing, and held herself upright by it, shutting her eyes to concentrate her strength. And by-and-by the bewildering sick emotion passed ; was it *him* whom she had seen ?

After this she crossed the river again in the ferry-boat, though it was a halfpenny each time, and she felt the expenditure to be extravagant, and walked about on the other bank till she found Dick, who naturally adopted the same means of finding her, neither of them thinking of any return “ home,”—a place which did not exist in their consciousness. Then they went and bought something in an eating-shop, and brought it out to a quiet corner opposite the “ Brocas clump,” and there ate their dinner, with the river flowing at their feet, and the skiffs of “ the gentlemen ” darting by. It was, or rather looked, a poetic meal, and few people passed in sight without a momentary envy of the humble picnic ; but to Dick Brown and his mother there

was nothing out of the way in it, and she tied up the fragments for supper in a spotted cotton handkerchief when they had finished. It was natural for them to eat out of doors, as well as to do everything else out of doors. Dick told her of his good luck, how kind Valentine had been, and gave her the half-crown he had received, and an account of all that was to be done for him. "If they don't mind him, they're sure to mind the other gentleman," said devout Dick, who believed in Val's power with a fervent and unquestioning faith. After a while he went across to the rafts, and hung about there ready for any odd job, and making himself conspicuous in eager anxiety to please the master. His mother remained with the fragments of their meal tied up in the handkerchief, on the same grassy bank where they had dined, watching the boats as they came and went. She did not understand how it was that they all dropped off one by one, and as suddenly reappeared again when the hour for dinner and the hour of "three o'clock school" passed. But she had nothing to do to call her from that musing and silence to which she had become habituated, and remained there the entire afternoon doing nothing but gaze.

At last, however, she made a great effort, and roused herself. The unknown boy after whom she yearned could not be identified among all these strange faces; and there was something which could be done for good Dick, the boy who had always been good to her. She did for Dick what no one could have expected her to do; she went and looked for a lodging where they could establish themselves. After a while she found two small rooms in a house facing the river,—one in which Dick could sleep, the other a room with a fireplace, where his hot meals, which he no doubt would insist upon, could be cooked, and where, in a corner, she herself could sleep when the day was over. She had a little stock of reserve money on her person, a few shillings saved, and something more, which was the remnant of a sum she had carried about with her for years, and which I believe she intended "to bury her," according to the curious pride which is common among the poor. But as for the moment there was no question of burying her, she felt justified in breaking in upon this little hoard to please her boy by such forlorn attempts at comfort as were in her power. She ventured to buy a few necessaries, and to make provision as well as she knew how for the night—the first night which

she would have passed for years under a roof which she could call her own. One of the chief reasons that reconciled her to this step was, that the room faced the river, and that not Dick alone, but the other whom she did not know, could be watched from the window. Should she get to know him, perhaps to speak to him, that other ?—to watch him every summer evening in his boat, floating up and down—to distinguish his voice in the crowd, and his step ? But for this hope she could not, I think, have made so great a sacrifice for Dick alone—a sacrifice she had not been able to make when the doing of it would have been still more important than now. Perhaps it was because she was growing older, and the individual had faded somewhat from her consciousness ; but the change bewildered even herself. She did it notwithstanding, and of her free will.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN Dick saw his friend and patron come down to the rafts that evening in company with another of the “gentlemen,” bigger, stronger, and older than himself, at whom everybody looked with respect and admiration, the state of his mind may be supposed. He had been hanging about all day, as I have said, making himself useful—a handy fellow, ready to push a boat into the water, to run and fetch an oar, to tie on the sheepskin on a rower’s seat, without standing on ceremony as to who told him to do so. The master himself, in the hurry of operations, had given him various orders without perceiving, so willing and ready was Dick, that it was a stranger, and not one of his own men, whom he addressed. Dick contemplated the conversation which ensued with a beating heart. He saw the lads look round, and that Valentine pointed him out to the potentate of the river-side ; and he saw one of the men join in, saying something, he was sure, in his favour ; and, after a terrible interval of suspense, Val came towards him, waving his hand to him in triumph. “There,” cried Val, “we’ve got you the place. Go and talk to old Harry yourself about wages and things. And mind what I said to you, Brown ; neither Lichen nor I will stand

any nonsense. We've made all sorts of promises for you ; and if you don't keep them, Lichen will kick you—or, if he don't, I will. You'd best keep steady, for your own sake."

"I'll keep steady," said Dick, with a grin on his face ; and it was all the boy could do to keep himself from executing a dance of triumph when he found himself really engaged at reasonable wages, and informed of the hour at which he was expected to present himself on the morrow. "Give an eye to my boat, Brown," said Val ; "see she's taken care of. I'll expect you to look out for me, and have her ready when you know I'm coming. I hate waiting," said the lad, with imperious good-humour. How Dick admired him as he stood there in his flannels and jersey—the handsomest, splendid, all-commanding young prince, who had stooped from his skies to interfere on his (Dick's) behalf, for no reason in the world except his will and pleasure. "How lucky I am," thought Dick to himself, "that he should have noticed me last night!"—and he made all manner of enthusiastic promises on account of the boat, and of general devotion to Val's service. The young potentate took all these protestations in the very best part. He stepped into his outrigger with lordly composure, while Dick, all glowing and happy, knelt on the raft to hold it. "You shan't want a friend, old fellow, as long as you behave yourself," said Val, with magnificent condescension which it was fine to see ; "I'll look after you," and he nodded at him as he shot along over the gleaming water. As for Dick, as his services were not required till next day, he went across the river to Coffin Lane, where his mother was waiting for him, to tell his news. She did not say very much, nor did he expect her to do so, but she took him by the arm and led him along the water-side to a house which stood in a corner, half facing the river, looking towards the sunset. She took him in at the open door, and up-stairs to the room in which she had already set out a homely and very scanty table for their supper. Dick did not know how to express the delight and thanks in his heart. He turned round and gave his mother a kiss in silent transport—a rare caress, such as meant more than words. The window of this room looked up the river, and straight into the "Brocas clump," behind which the sunset was preparing all its splendour. In the little room beyond, which was to be Dick's bedroom—glorious title!—the window looked

straight across to the rafts. I do not think that any young squire coming into a fine property was ever more happy than the young tramp finding himself for almost the first time in his life in a place which he could call home. He could not stop smiling, so full of happiness was he, nor seat himself to his poor supper, but went round and round the two rooms, planning where he could put up a shelf or arrange a table. "I'll make it so handy for you, mother; you'll not know you're born!" cried Dick, in the fulness of his delight.

And yet two barer little rooms perhaps no human home ever was made in. There was nothing there that was not indispensable—a table, two chairs, and no more; and in Dick's room a small iron bed. All that his mother possessed for her own use was a mattress, which could be rolled up and put aside during the day. She took her son's pleasure very quietly, as was her wont, but smiled with a sense of having made him happy, which was pleasant to her, although to make him happy had not been her only motive. When she had put away the things from their supper, she sat down at the open window and looked out on the river. The air was full of sound, so softened by the summer that all rudeness and harshness were taken out of it: in the foreground the ferry-boat was crossing and recrossing, the man standing up with his punt-pole against the glow of the western sky; just under the window lay the green eyot, waving with young willows, and up and down in a continual stream on the sunny side of it went and came the boys in their boats. "Show him to me, Dick, when he comes," said the woman. Dick did not require to be told whom she meant, neither was he surprised at this intensity of interest in *him*, which made his young patron the only figure worth identification in that crowded scene. Had he not been, as it were, Dick's guardian angel, who had suddenly appeared for the boy's succour?—and what more natural than that Dick's mother should desire before everything else to see one who had been such a friend to her boy?

But I do not think she was much the wiser when Val came down the river, accompanied by a group of backers on the bank, who had made themselves hoarse shrieking and shouting at him. He was training for a race, and this was one of his trial nights. Lichen himself had agreed to come down to give Val his advice and instructions—or, in more familiar phraseology, was "coaching" him for the import-

ant effort. Dick rushed out at the sight, to cheer and shriek too, in an effervescence of loyalty which had nothing to do with the character of Val's performance. The mother sat at the window and looked out upon them, longing and sickening with a desire unsatisfied. Was this all she was ever to see of him—a distant speck in a flying boat? But to know that this was him—that he was there before her eyes—that he had taken up Dick and established him in his own train, as it were, near to him, by a sudden fancy which to her, who knew what cause there was for it, seemed something like a special interference of God,—filled her with a strange confused rapture of mingled feelings. She let her tears fall quietly as she sat all alone, gazing upon the scene. It must be God's doing, she felt, since no man had any hand in it. She had separated them in her wild justice, rending her own heart while she did so, but God had brought them together. She was totally untaught, poor soul, in religious matters, as well as in everything else; but in her ignorance she had reached that point which our high philosophy reaches struggling through the mist, and which nowadays the unsatisfied and over-instructed mind loves to go back to, thinking itself happier with one naked primary truth than with a system however divine. No one could have taken from this dweller in the woods and wilds the sense of a God in the world,—almost half visible, sometimes, to musing, silent souls like her own; a God always watchful, always comprehensible to the simple mind, in the mere fact of His perpetual watchfulness, fatherliness, yet severity,—sending hunger and cold as well as warmth and plenty, and guiding those revolutions of the seasons and the outdoor facts of existence which impress the untaught yet thoughtful being as nothing taught by books can ever do. To know as she did that there was a God in the world, and not believe at the same time that His interference was the most natural of all things, would have been impossible to this primitive creature. Therefore, knowing no agencies in the universe but that of man direct and visible, and that of God, which to her could scarcely be called invisible, she believed unhesitatingly that God had done this—that He had balked her, with a hand and power more great than hers. What was to be the next step she could not tell,—it was beyond her: she could only sit

and watch how things would befall, having not only no power but no wish to interfere.

Thus things went on for the remaining portion of the "half," which lasted only about six weeks more. Dick set himself to the work of making everything "handy" for her with enthusiasm in his odd hours, which were few, for his services at the rafts were demanded imperatively from earliest morning till the late evening after sunset, when the river dropped into darkness. "The gentlemen," it is true, were all cleared off their favourite stream by nine o'clock; but the local lovers of the Thames would linger on it during those summer nights, especially when there was a moon, till poor Dick, putting himself across in his boat when all at last was silent—the last boating party disposed of, and the small craft all ranged in their places ready for to-morrow—would feel his arms scarcely able to pull the light sculls, and his limbs trembling under him. Even then, after his long day's work, when he had eaten his supper, he would set to work to put up the shelves he had promised his mother, or to fix upon his walls the pictures which delighted himself. Dick began with the lowest rudiments of art, the pictures in the penny papers, with which he almost papered his walls; but his taste advanced as his pennies grew more plentiful: the emotional prints of the 'Police News' ceased to charm him, and he rose to the pictures of the 'Illustrated,' or whatever might be the picture-paper of the time. This advance—so quickly does the mind work—took place in the six weeks that remained of the half; and by the time "the gentlemen" left, and work slackened, Dick's room was already gorgeous, with here and there a mighty chromo, strong in tint and simple in subject, surrounded with all manner of royal progresses and shows of various kinds, as represented in the columns of the prints aforesaid. He grew handy, too, in amateur carpentering, having managed to buy himself some simple tools; and when he had a spare moment he betook himself to the bits of simple carving which Val had handed over to him, and worked at them with a real enjoyment which proved his possession of some germ at least of artistic feeling. The boy never had a moment unemployed with all these occupations, necessary and voluntary. He was as happy as the day was long, always

ready with a smile and pleasant word, always sociable, not given to calculating his time too nicely, or to grumbling if some of his "mates" threw upon his willing shoulders more than his share of work. The boating people about got to know him, and among the boys he had already become highly popular. Very grand personages indeed—Lichen himself, for instance, than whom there could be no more exalted being—would talk to him familiarly; and some kind lads, finding out his tastes, brought him pictures of which they themselves had got tired, and little carved brackets from their walls, and much other rubbish of this description, all of which was delightful to Dick.

As for Valentine, the effect produced upon him by the possession of a *protégé* was very striking. He felt the responsibility deeply, and at once began to ponder as to the duties of a superior to his inferiors, of which, of course, one time or other he had heard much. An anxious desire to do his duty to this retainer who had been so oddly thrown upon his hands, and for whom he felt an unaccountable warmth of patronising friendship, took possession of him. He made many trite but admirable theories on the subject—theories, however, not at all trite to Val, who believed he had invented them for his own good and that of mankind. It was not enough, he reasoned with himself, to have saved a lad from the life of a tramp, and got him regular employment, unless at the same time you did something towards improving his mind, and training him for the *rôle* of a respectable citizen. These were very fine words, but Val (strictly within himself) was not afraid of fine words. No young soul of sixteen, worth anything, ever is. To make a worthy citizen of his waif seemed to him for some time his mission. Having found out that Dick could read, he pondered very deeply and carefully what books to get for him, and how to lead him upon the path of knowledge. With a little sigh he recognised the fact that there was no marked literary turn in Dick's mind, and that he preferred a bit of wood and a knife, as a means of relaxation, to books. Val hesitated long between the profitable and the pleasant in literature as a means of educating his *protégé*. Whether to rouse him to the practical by accounts of machinery and manufactures, or to awake his imagination by romance, he could not easily decide. I fear his decision was biassed ultimately by the possession of a number of books which he had himself out-

grown, but which he rightly judged might do very well for his humble friend, whose total want of education made him younger than Val by a few years, and therefore still within the range of the 'Headless Horseman,'—of Captain Mayne Reid's vigorous productions, and other schoolboy literature of the same class. These he brought down, a few volumes at a time, to the rafts, and gave them to his friend with injunctions to read them. "You shall have something better when you have gone through these; but I daresay you'll like them—I used to myself," said Val. Dick accepted them with devout respect; but I think the greatest pleasure he got out of them was when he ranged them in a little book-shelf he had himself made, and felt as a bibliopole does when he arranges his fine editions, that he too had a library. Dick did not care much for the stories of adventure with which Val fed him as a kind of milk for babes. He knew of adventures on the road, of bivouacs out of doors, quite enough in his own person. But he dearly liked to see them ranged in his book-shelf. All kinds of curious instincts, half developed and unintelligible even to himself, were in Dick's mind,—the habits of a race of which he knew nothing—partially burnt out and effaced by a course of life infinitely different, yet still existing obstinately within him, and prompting him to he knew not what. If we could study human nature as we study fossils and strata, how strange it would be to trace the connection between Dick's rude book-shelves, with the coarse little ornament he had carved on them, and the pleasure it gave him to range Val's yellow volumes upon that rough shelf—and the great glorious green cabinets in Lady Eskside's drawing-room! Nobody was aware of this connection, himself least of all. And Val, who had an evident right to inherit so refined a taste, cared as little for the Vernis-Martin as though he had been born a savage; by such strange laws, unknown to us poor gropers after scraps of information, does inheritance go!

All this time, however, Dick's mother had not seen Val nearer than in his boat, for which she looked through all the sunny afternoons and long evenings, spending half her silent intent life, so different to the outward one, so full of strange self-absorption and concentrated feeling in the watch. This something out of herself, to attract her wandering visionary thoughts and hold her passionate heart fast, was what the

woman had wanted throughout the strange existence which had been warped and twisted out of all possibility at its very outset. Her wild intolerance of confinement, her desire for freedom, her instinct of constant wandering, troubled her no more. She did her few domestic duties in the morning, made ready Dick's meals for him (and they lived with Spartan simplicity, both having been trained to eat what they could get, most often by the roadside—cold scraps of food which required no preparation), and kept his clothes and her own in order; and all the long afternoon would sit there watching for the skimming boat, the white jersey, with the distinctive mark which she soon came to recognise. I think Val's jersey had a little red cross on the breast—an easy symbol to recollect. When he came down the river at last, and left his boat, she went in with a sigh, half of relief, from her watch, half of pain that it was over, and began to prepare her boy's supper. They held her whole existence thus in suspense between them; one utterly ignorant of it, the other not much better informed. When Dick came in, tired but cheery, he would show her the books Mr Ross had brought him, or report to her the words he had said. Dick adored him frankly, with a boy's pride in all his escapades; and there were few facts in Val's existence which were not known in that little house at the corner, all unconscious as he was of his importance there. One morning, however, Dick approached this unfailing subject with a little embarrassment, looking furtively at his mother to see how far he might venture to speak.

"You don't ever touch the cards now, mother?" he said all at once, with a guilty air, which she, absorbed in her own thoughts, did not perceive.

"The cards?—I never did when I could help it, you know."

"I know," he said, "but I don't suppose there's no harm in it; it ain't you as puts them how they come. All you've got to do with it is saying what it means. Folks in the Bible did the same—Joseph, for one, as was carried to the land of Egypt."

The Bible was all the lore Dick had. He liked the Old Testament a great deal better than the 'Headless Horseman'; and, like other well-informed persons, he was glad to let his knowledge appear when there was an occasion for such exhibitions. His mother shook her head.

"It's no harm, maybe, to them that think no harm," she

said ; " no, it ain't me that settles them—who is it ? It must be either God or the devil. And God don't trouble Himself with the like of that—He has more and better to do ; so it must be the devil ; and I don't hold with it, unless I'm forced for a living. I can't think as it's laid to you then."

" I wish you'd just do it once to please me, mother ; it couldn't do no harm."

She shook her head, but looked at him with questioning eyes.

" Suppose it was to please a gentleman, as I am more in debt to than I can ever pay—more than I want ever to pay," cried Dick, " except in doing everything to please him as long as I live. You may say it ain't me as can do this, and that I'm taking it out of you ; but you're all I have to help me, and it ain't to save myself. Mother, it's Mr Ross as has heard somehow how clever you are ; and if you would do it just once to please him and me ! "

She did not answer for a few minutes. Dick thought she was struggling with herself to overcome her repugnance. Then she replied, in an altered and agitated voice, " For him I'll do it—you can bring him to-morrow."

" How kind you are, mother !" said Dick, gratefully. " College breaks up the day after to-morrow," he added, in a dolorous voice. " I don't know what I shall do without him and all of them—the place won't look the same, nor I shan't feel the same. Mayn't he come to-night ? I think he's going off to-morrow up to Scotland, as they're all talking of. Half of 'em goes up to Scotland. I wonder what kind of a place it is. Were we ever there ? "

" Once—when you were quite a child."

" 'Twas 'there the t'other little chap died ? " said Dick, compassionately. " Poor mammy, I didn't mean to vex you. I wonder what he'd have been like now if he'd lived. Look here, mother, mayn't *he* come to-night ? "

" If you like," she said, trying to seem calm, but deeply agitated by this reference. He saw this, and set it down naturally to the melancholy recollections he had evoked.

" Poor mother," he said, rising from his dinner, " you *are* a feelin' one ! all this time, and you've never forgotten. I'll go away and leave you quiet ; and just before lock-up, when it's getting dark, him and me will come across. You won't say nothing you can help that's dreadful if the cards turn

up bad?—and speak as kind to him as you can, mother dear, he's been so kind to me."

Speak as kind to him as you can! What words were these to be said to her whose whole being was disturbed and excited by the idea of seeing this stranger! Keep yourself from falling at his feet and kissing them; from falling on his neck and weeping over him. If Dick had but known, these were more likely things to happen. She scarcely saw her boy go out, or could distinguish what were the last words he said to her. Her heart was full of the other—the other, whose face her hungry eyes had not been able to distinguish from her window, who had never seen her, so far as he knew, and yet who was hers, though she dared not say so, dared not claim any share in him. Dared not! though she could not have told why. To her there were barriers between them impassable. She had given him up when he was a child for the sake of justice, and the wild natural virtue and honour in her soul stood between her and the child she had relinquished. It seemed to her that in giving him up she had come under a solemn tacit engagement never to make herself known to him, and she was too profoundly agitated now to be able to think. Indeed I do not think that reasonable sober thought, built upon just foundations, was ever possible to her. She could muse and brood, and did so, and had done so,—doing little else for many a silent year; and she could sit still, mentally, and allow her imagination and mind to be taken possession of by a tumult of fancy and feeling, which drew her now and then to a hasty decision, and which, had she been questioned on the subject, she would have called thinking—as, indeed, it stands for thinking with many of us. It had been this confused working in her of recollection and of a fanciful remorse which had determined her to give up Valentine to his father; and now that old fever seemed to have come back again, and to boil in her veins. I don't know if she had seriously regretted her decision then, or if she had ever allowed herself to think of it as a thing that could have been helped, or that might still be remedied. But by this time, at least, she had come to feel that it never could be remedied, and that Valentine Ross, Lord Eskside's heir, could never be carried off to the woods and fields as her son, as perhaps a child might have been. He was a gentleman now, she felt, with a forlorn pride, which mingled strangely with the anguish of absolute

loss with which she realised the distance between them,—the tremendous and uncrossable gulf between his state and hers. He was her son, yet never could know her, never acknowledge her,—and she was to speak with him that night.

The sun had begun to sink, before, starting up from her long and agitated musing, the womanish idea struck her of making some preparations for his reception, arranging her poor room and her person to make as favourable an impression as possible upon the young prince who was her own child. What was she to do? She had been a gentleman's wife once, though for so short a time; and sometimes of late this recollection had come strongly to her mind, with a sensation of curious pride which was new to her. Now she made an effort to recall that strange chapter in her life, when she had lived among beautiful things, and worn beautiful dresses, and might have learned what gentlemen like. She had never seen Val sufficiently near to distinguish his features; and oddly enough, ignoring the likeness of her husband which was in Dick, she expected to find in Valentine another Richard, and instinctively concluded that his tastes must be what his father's were. After a short pause of consideration, she went to a trunk, which she had lately sent for to the vagrant headquarters, where it had been kept for her for years—a trunk containing some relics of that departed life in which she had been "a lady." Out of this she took a little shawl embroidered in silken garlands, and which had faded into colours even more tasteful and sweet than they were in their newest glories—a shawl for which Mr Grinder, or any other *dilettante* in Eton, would have given her almost anything she liked to ask. This she threw over a rough table of Dick's making, and placed on it some flowers in a homely little vase of coarse material yet graceful shape. Here, too, she placed a book or two drawn from the same repository of treasures—books in rich faded binding, chiefly poetry, which Richard had given her in his early folly. The small table with its rich cover, its bright flowers and gilded books, looked like a little altar of fancy and grace in the bare room; it was indeed an altar dedicated to the memory of the past, to the pleasure of the unknown.

When she had arranged this touching and simple piece of incongruity, she proceeded to dress herself. She took off

her printed gown and put on a black one, which also came out of her trunk. She put aside the printed handkerchief which she usually wore, tramp fashion, on her head, and brushed out her long, beautiful black hair, in which there was not one white thread. Why should there have been ? She was not more than thirty-five or thirty-six, though she looked older. She twisted her hair in great coils round her head—a kind of coiffure which I think the poor creature remembered Richard had liked. Her appearance was strangely changed when she had made this simple toilet. She looked like some wild half-savage princess condemned to exile and penury, deprived of her retinue and familiar pomp, but not of her natural dignity. The form of her fine head, the turn of her graceful shoulders, had not been visible in her tramp dress. When she had done everything she could think of to perfect the effect which she prepared, poor soul, so carefully, she sat down, with what calm she could muster, to wait for her boys. Her boys, her children, the two who had come into the world at one birth, had lain in her arms together, but who now were as unconscious of the relationship, and as far divided, as if worlds had lain between them ! Indeed she was quite calm and still to outward appearance, having acquired that power of perfect external self-restraint which many passionate natures possess, though her heart beat loud in her head and ears, performing a whole muffled orchestra of wild music. Had any stranger spoken to her she would not have heard ; had any one come in, except the two she was expecting, I do not think she would have seen them, she was so utterly absorbed in one thought.

At last she heard the sound of their steps coming upstairs. The light had begun to wane in the west, and a purple tone of half darkness had come into the golden air of the evening. She stood up mechanically, not knowing what she was doing, and the next moment two figures stood before her—one well known, her familiar boy,—the other ! Was this the other ? A strange sensation, half of pleasure, half of disappointment, shot through her at the sight of his face.

Val had come in carelessly enough, taking off his hat, but with the ease of a superior. He stopped short, however, when he saw the altogether unexpected appearance of the woman who was Dick's mother. He felt a curious thrill come into his veins—of surprise, he thought. “I beg your pardon,”

he said ; "I hope you don't mind my coming ? Brown said you wouldn't mind."

"You are very welcome, sir," she said, her voice trembling in spite of her. "If there is anything I can do for you. You have been so kind—to my boy."

"Oh," said Val, embarrassed, with a shy laugh, "it pays to be kind to Brown. He's done us credit. I say—what a nice place you've got here !"

He was looking almost with consternation at the beautiful embroidery and the books. Where could they have picked up such things ? He was half impressed and half alarmed, he could not have told why. He put out a furtive hand and clutched at Dick's arm. "I say, do you think she minds ?" Val had never been so shy in his life.

"You want me to tell you your fortune, sir ?" she said, recovering a little. "I don't hold with it ; but I'll do it if you wish it. I'll do it—once—and for you."

"Oh, thanks, awfully," cried Val, more and more taken aback—"if you're sure you don't mind :" and he held out his hand with a certain timidity most unusual to him. She took it suddenly in both hers by an uncontrollable movement, held it fast, gazed at it earnestly, and bent down her head as if she would have kissed it. Val felt her hands tremble, and her agitation was so evident that both the boys were moved to unutterable wonder ; yet somehow, I think, the one of them who wondered least was Valentine, upon whom this trembling eager grasp made the strangest impression. He felt as if the tears were coming to his eyes, but could not tell why.

"It is not the hand I thought to see," she said, as if speaking to herself—"not the hand I thought." Then dropping it suddenly, with an air of bewilderment, she said, hastily, "It is not by the hand I do it, but by the cards."

"I ought to have crossed my hand with silver, shouldn't I ?" said Val, trying to laugh ; but he was excited too.

"No, no," she said, tremulously ; "no, no—my boy's mother can take none of your silver. Are you as fond of him as he is fond of you ?"

"Mother !" cried Dick, amazed at the presumption of this inquiry.

"Well—fond ?" said Val, doubtfully ; "yes, really, I think I am, after all, though I'm sure I don't know why.

He should have been a gentleman. Mrs Brown, I'm afraid it is getting near lock-up——”

“My name is not Mrs Brown,” she said, quickly.

“Oh, isn't it? I beg your pardon,” said Val. “I thought as he was Brown—Mrs ——?”

“There's no Miss nor Missis among my folks. They call me Myra—Forest Myra,” she said, hastily. “Dick, give me the cards, and I will do my best.”

But Dick was sadly distressed to see that his mother was not doing her best. She turned the cards about, and murmured some of the usual jargon about fair men and dark women, and news to receive and journeys to go. But she was not herself: either the fortune was so very bad that she was afraid to reveal it, or else something strange must have happened to her. She threw them down at last impatiently, and fixed her intent eyes upon Valentine's face.

“If you have all the good I wish you, you'll be happy indeed,” she said; “but I can't do nothing to-night. Sometimes the power leaves us.” Then she put her hand lightly on his shoulder, and gazed at him beseechingly. “Will you come again?” she said.

“Oh yes,” said Val, relieved. He drew a step back, with a sense of having escaped. “I don't really mind, you know, at all,” he said; “it was nothing but a joke. But I'll come again with pleasure. I say, what have you done to that carving, Brown?”

How glad Val was to get away from her touch, and from her intent eyes! and yet he did not want to go away. He hastened to the other end of the room with Dick, who was glad also to find that the perplexing interview was at an end, and got out his bit of carving with great relief. Val stood for a long time (as they all thought) side by side with the other, laying their heads together, the light locks and the dark—talking both together, as boys do; and felt himself calm down, but with a sense that something strange had happened to him, something more than he could understand. The mother sat down on her chair, her limbs no longer able to sustain her. She was glad, too, that it was over—glad and sad, and so shaken with conflicting emotions, that she scarcely knew what was going on. Her heart sounded in her ears like great waves; and through a strange mist in her eyes, and the gathering twilight, she saw vaguely, dimly, the two beside her. Oh, if she could but have put her arms

round them and kissed them both together ! But she could not. She sat down silent among the shadows, a shadow herself, against the evening light, and saw them in a mist, and held her peace.

“ You did not tell me your mother was a lady,” said Val, as the two went back together through the soft dusk to the river-side.

“ I never knew it,” said wondering Dick ; “ I never thought it—till to-night.”

“ Ah, but I am sure of it,” said Val. “ I thought you couldn’t be a cad, Brown, or I should not have taken to you like this. She’s a lady, sure enough ; and what’s more,” he added, with an embarrassed laugh, “ I feel as if I had known her somewhere—before—I suppose, before I was born ! ”

CHAPTER XIX.

AFTER this curious meeting, Val paid several visits to the little corner house ; so many, indeed, that his tutor interfered, as he had a perfect right to do, and reproached him warmly for his love of low society, and for choosing companions who must inevitably do him harm. Mr Grinder was quite right in this, and I hope the tutors of all our boys would do exactly the same in such a case ; but Val, I am afraid, did not behave so respectfully as he ought, and indeed was insubordinate and scarcely gentlemanly, Mr Grinder complained. The young tutor, who had been an Eton boy himself not so very long before, had inadvertently spoken of poor Dick as a “ Brocas cad.” Now I am not sufficiently instructed to know what special ignominy, if any, is conveyed by this designation ; but Val flamed up, as he did on rare occasions, his fury and indignation being all the greater that he usually managed to restrain himself. He spoke to Mr Grinder as a pupil ought not to have done. He informed him that if he knew Dick he never would venture to use such terms ; and if he did not know him, he had no right to speak at all, not being in the least aware of the injustice he was doing. There was a pretty business altogether between the high-spirited impetuous boy and the

young man who had been too lately a boy himself to have much patience with the other. Mr Grinder all but "complained of" Val—an awful proceeding, terminating in the block, and sudden execution in ordinary cases—a small matter enough with most boys, but sufficiently appalling to those who had attained such a position as Val's, high up in school; and intolerable to his impetuous temperament. This terrible step was averted by the interposition of mediators, by the soft words of old Mr Grinder, who was Val's "dame," and other friends. But young Mr Grinder wrote a letter to Ross-craig on the subject, which gave Lady Eskside more distress and trouble than anything which had happened to her for a long time. If she had got her will, her husband would have gone up instantly to inquire into the matter, and it is possible that the identity of Dick and his mother might have been discovered at once, and some future complications spared. The old lady wrung her hands and wept salt tears over the idea that "his mother's blood" was asserting itself thus, and that her son Richard's story might be about to be repeated again, but with worse and deeper shades of misery. Lord Eskside, however, who had been so much disturbed by dangers which affected her very lightly, was not at all moved by this. He demurred completely to the idea of going to Eton, but agreed that Val himself should be written to, and explanations asked. Val wrote a very magnificent letter in reply, as fine a production as ever sixteen (but he was seventeen by this time) put forth. He related with dignity how he had encountered a friendly boy on the river's side who helped him when his boat swamped—how he had discovered that he was an admirable fellow, supporting his old mother, and in want of work—how he had exerted himself to procure work for this deserving stranger, and how he had gone to his house two or three times to see how he was getting on. "I have been lending him books," wrote Val, "and doing what I could to help him to get on. His master, who took him on my recommendation, and Lichen's (you know Lichen? the captain of the boats), says he never had such a good man in his place; and I have thought it was my duty to help him on. If you and grandmamma think I ought not to do so," Valentine concluded majestically, "I confess I shall be very sorry; for Brown is one of the best fellows that ever was born."

Lady Eskside wept when she read this letter—tears of

joy, and pride, and happy remorse at having thought badly of her boy. She wrote him such a letter as moved even Val's boyish insensibility, with a ten-pound note in it, with which she intrusted him to buy something for his *protégé*. "It is like your sweet nature to try to help him," she said; "and oh, Val, my darling, I am so ashamed of myself for having a momentary fear!" Mr Grinder had a somewhat cold response from Lord Eskside, but not so trenchant as my lady would have wished it. "We are very much obliged to you for your care," said the old lord; "but I think Valentine has given such good reasons for his conduct that we must not be hard upon him. Of course nothing of this sort should be allowed to go too far." Thus Val was victorious; but I am glad to have to tell of him that as soon as he was sure of this, he went off directly and begged Mr Grinder's pardon. "I had no right, sir, to speak to you so," said the boy. They were better friends ever after, I believe; and for a long time Lady Eskside was not troubled with any terrors about Val's "mother's blood!"

All this time Dick "got on" so, that it became a wonder to see him. He had finished Val's carving long ago, and presented it to his gracious patron, declining with many blushes the "five bob" which he had been promised. Before he was eighteen, he had grown, in virtue of his absolute trustworthiness, to be the first and most important ministrant at the "rafts." Everybody knew him, everybody liked him. So far as young squires and lordlings constitute that desirable thing, Dick lived in the very best society; his manners ought to have been good, for they were moulded on the manners of our flower of English youth. I am not very sure myself that he owed so much to this (for Eton boys, so far as I have seen, bear a quite extraordinary resemblance to other boys) as to his naturally sweet and genial temper, his honest and generous humbleness and unselfishness. Dick Brown was the very last person Dick thought of, whatever he might happen to be doing—and this is the rarest of all qualities in youth. Then he was so happy in having his way, and a "home," and in overcoming his mother's fancy for constant movement, that his work was delightful to him. It was hard work, and entailed a very long daily strain of his powers—too long, perhaps, for a growing boy—but yet it was pleasant, and united a kind of play with continuous exertion. All summer long he was on the river-side, the

busiest of lads or men, in noiseless boating-shoes, and with a dress which continually improved till Dick became the nattiest as well as the handiest of his kind. He had a horror of everything that was ugly and dirty: when others lounged about in their hour's rest, while their young clients were at school, Dick would be hot about something;—painting and rubbing the old boats, scraping the oars, bringing cleanliness, and order, and that bold kind of decoration which belongs to boat-building, to the resuscitation of old gigs and “tubs” which had seemed good for nothing. He would even look after the flowers in the little strip of garden, and sow the seeds, and trim the border, while he waited, if there happened to be no old boats to cobble. He was happy when the sun shone upon nothing but orderliness and (as he felt it) beauty.

In his own rooms this quality of mind was still more apparent. I have said that he and his mother lived with Spartan simplicity. This enabled him to do a great deal more with his wages than his more luxurious companions. First, comforts, and then superfluities—elegances, if we may use the word—began to flow into the room. The elegances, perhaps, were not very elegant at first, but his taste improved at the most rapid rate. When he had nothing better to do, he would go and take counsel with Fullady the wood-carver, and get lessons from him, helping now and then at a piece of work, to the astonishment of his master. In the evening he carved small pieces of furniture, with which he decorated his dwelling. In winter he was initiated into the mysteries of boat-building, and worked at this trade with absolute devotion and real enjoyment. In short, Dick's opinion was that nobody so happy as himself had ever lived—his work was as good as play, and better, he thought; and he was paid for doing what it gave him the greatest pleasure to do—a perennial joke with the gentle fellow. In all this prosperity Dick never forgot his first patron. When Val rowed, Dick ran by the bank shouting till he was hoarse. When Val was preferred to be one of the sublime Eight, who are as gods among men, he went almost out of his wits with pride and joy. “*We'll* win now, sure enough, at Henley!” he said to his mother, with unconscious appropriation of the possessive pronoun. But when Dick heard of the squabble between Val and his tutor, his good sense showed at once. He took his young patron a step aside, taking off his hat

with almost an exaggeration of respect—"Don't come to our house again, sir," he said; "the gentleman is in the right. You are very kind to be so free with me, to talk and make me almost a friend; but it wouldn't do if every Eton gentleman were to make friends with the fellows on the water-side—the gentleman is in the right."

"My people don't think so, Brown," cried Val; "look here, what has been sent me to buy you something," and he showed his ten-pound note.

Dick's eyes flashed with eager pleasure, not for the money, though even that was no small matter. "I don't understand," he added, after a moment, shaking his head. "I don't think they'd like it either, if they knew. You must have been giving too good an account, sir, of mother and me."

Val only laughed, and crushed the crisp bank-note into the pocket of his trousers. "I mean to spend it for you on Monday, when I am going to town on leave," he said. He was going to see Miss Percival, his grandmother's friend. And, in fact, he did buy Dick a number of things, which seemed to his youthful fancy appropriate in the circumstances. He bought him some books, a few of those standard works which Val knew ought to be in everybody's library, though he did not much trouble them himself; and a capital box of tools, and drawing materials, for Dick had displayed some faculty that way. Both the boys were as happy as possible—the one in bestowing, the other in receiving, this gift. Lady Eskside's present gave them the deepest pleasure, though she was so far from knowing who was the recipient of her bounty. "Brown," said Val, solemnly, after they had enjoyed the delight of going over every separate article, and examining and admiring it—"Brown, you mind what I am going to say. You must rise in the world; you have made a great deal of progress already, and you must make still more. Heaps of fellows not half so good as you have got to be rich, and raised themselves by their exertions. You must improve your mind; and you must take the good of every advantage that offers, and rise in the world."

"I'll try, sir," said Dick, with the cheeriest laugh. He was ready to have promised to scale the skies, if Val had recommended it. He arranged his books carefully in a little bookcase he had made, which was far handsomer than the old one which had received the yellow volumes—overflow-

ings of Val's puerile library. But I am not sure that Macaulay and Gibbon instructed him much more than the 'Headless Horseman' had done. His was not a mind which was much affected by literature ; he cared more for doing than for reading, and liked his box of tools better than his library. Musing over his work, he revolved many things in his head, and got to have very just views about matters concerning which his education had been a blank ; but he did not get his ideas out of books. That was not a method congenial to him, though he would have acknowledged with respect that it was most probably the right way. But anyhow, Val had done his duty by his *protégé*. He had put into his hands the means of rising in the world, and he had suggested this ambition. Whatever might happen hereafter, he had done his best.

And Dick's mother continued contented also, which was a perpetual wonder to him. She weathered through the winter, though Dick often watched her narrowly, fearing a return to her old vagrant way. When Val's boat disappeared from the river with all the others, she was indeed restless for a little while ; but it was, as it happened, just about that time that Val took to visiting the little corner house, and these visits kept her in a visionary absorption, always afraid, yet always glad, when he came. In spring she was again somewhat alarming to her son, moving so restlessly in the small space they had, and looking out so wistfully from the window, that he trembled to hear some suggestion of fresh wandering. All that she asked, however, was, When did the boats go up for the first time ? a question which Dick answered promptly.

"On the 1st of March, mother. I wish it was come," cried Dick, with animation.

"And so do I," she said, with musing eyes fixed on the river ; then alarmed, perhaps, lest he should question her, she added hastily, "It is cheery to see the boats."

"So it is," said Dick, "especially for you, mother, who go out so seldom. You should take a walk along the banks ; it's cheerful always. I don't think you half know how pretty it is."

She shook her head. "I am not one for walks," she said, with a half smile—"not for pleasure, Dick. Since I've given up our long tramps, I don't feel to care for moving. I'm getting old, I think."

"Old!" said Dick, cheerily; "it will be time enough to think of that in twenty years."

"Twenty years is a terrible long time," she replied, with a little shiver; "I hope I'll be dead and gone long before that."

"I wish you wouldn't speak so, mother."

"Ah, but it's true. My life ain't much good to any one," she said. "I am not let to live in my own way, and I can't live in any other. If God would take me, it would be for the best. Then I might have another chance."

"Mother, you break my heart," cried Dick, with a face full of anxiety, throwing away his tools, and coming up to her. "Do you mean that it is I that won't let you live your own way?"

"I don't blame nobody, but myself—no; you've been a good boy—a very good boy—to me," she cried; "better, a long way, than I've been to you."

"Mother," said the lad, laying his hand on her shoulder, his face flushing with emotion, "if it's hard upon you like this—if you want to start off again—"

"No, I don't, I don't!" she said, with suppressed passion; then falling back into her old dreamy tone—"So the boats go up on the 1st of March? and that's Monday. To see 'em makes the river cheery. I'm a little down with the winter and all; but as soon as I see 'em, I'll be all right."

"Please God, mother," said pious Dick, going back to his carving. He was satisfied, but yet he was startled. For, after all, why should she care so much about the boats?

This 1st of March inaugurated Val's last summer on the river—at least, on this part of the river, for he had still Oxford and its triumphs in prospect. That "summer half" was his last in Eton, and naturally he made the most of it. Val had, as people say, "done very well" at school. He was not a brilliant success, but still he had done very well, and his name in the school list gave his grandparents great pleasure. Lord Eskside kept a copy of that little *brochure* on his library table, and would finger it half consciously many a time when some county magnate was interviewing the old lord. Val's name appeared in it like this: * Ross (5) γ. Now this was not anything like the stars and ribbons of the name next above his, which was B * Robinson, (19) α; for I do not mean to pretend that he was very studious, or had much chance of being in the Select for the Newcastle Scholar-

ship (indeed he missed this distinction, though he went in for it gallantly, without being, however, much disappointed by his failure). To be sure, I have it all my own way in recording what Val did at Eton, since nobody is likely nowadays, without hard labour in the way of looking up old lists, to be in a position to contradict me. But he had the privilege of writing his letters upon paper bearing the mystic monogram of Pop.—*i.e.*, he was a member of *Eton Society*, which was a sure test of his popularity; and he was privileged in consequence to walk about with a cane, and to take part in debates on very abstruse subjects (I am not quite sure which privilege is thought the most important), and received full recognition as “a swell,”—a title which, I am happy to say, bears no vulgar interpretation at Eton, as meaning either rank or riches. And he was a very sublime sight to see on the 4th of June, the great Eton holiday, both in the morning, when he appeared in school in court dress—breeches and black silk stockings—and delivered one of those “Speeches” with which Eton upon that day delights such members of the fashionable world as can spare a summer morning out of the important business of the season; and in the evening, when he turned out in still more gorgeous array, stroke of the best boat on the river, and a greater personage than it is easy for a grown-up and sober-minded imagination to conceive.

It happened that this particular year Mr Pringle was in London upon some business or other, and had brought his daughter Violet with him to see the world. Vi was seventeen, and being an only daughter, and the chief delight of her parents’ hearts, and pride of her brothers’, big and little, was already “out,” though many people shook their heads at Mrs Pringle’s precipitancy in producing her daughter. Violet’s hair was somewhat darker now that it was turned up, but showed the pale golden hue of her childhood still in the locks which, when the wind blew upon her, would shake themselves out in little rings over her ears and round her pretty forehead. Her eyes were as dark and liquid as they had been when she was a child, with a wistful look in them, which was somewhat surprising, considering how entirely happy a life she had led from her earliest breath, surrounded with special love and fondness; but so it was, account for it who will. Those tender eyes that shone out of her happy youthful face were surely conscious of some trouble, which,

as it did not exist in the present, must be to come, and which, with every pretty look, she besought and entreated you to ward off from her, to help her through. But a happy little maiden was Vi, looking through those pretty eyes, surprised and sweet, at London—tripping everywhere by her proud father's side, with her hand on his arm, looking at the fine pictures, looking at the fine people and the fine horses in the Park, and going over the sights as innocent country people do when such a happy chance as a child to take about happens to them. Some one suggested to Mr Pringle the fact of the Eton celebration during this pleasant course of dissipation, and Vi's eyes lighted up with a sweet glow of pleasure beyond words when it was finally decided that they were to go.

And go they did, conscientiously seeing everything. They went to "Speeches" in the morning—that august ceremonial—and heard Val speak, and a great many more. Violet confined her interest to the modern languages which she understood; but Mr Pringle felt it incumbent upon him to look amused at the jokes in Greek, which, I fear, the poor gentleman in reality knew little more about than Vi did. But the crowning glory of the morning was that Val in his "speaking clothes" (and very speaking, very telling articles they were, in Violet's eyes at least) walked through college with them afterwards, bareheaded, with the sun shining on his dark curls, the same bold brown boy who had carried off the little girl from the Hewan six years before, though by this time much more obsequious to Vi. He showed himself most willing and ready all day to be the cicerone of "his cousins;" and when in the evening, Violet, holding fast by her father's arm, her heart beating high with pleasure past and pleasure to come, walked down to the rafts in company with Val in the aquatic splendours of his boating costume—straw hat wreathed with flowers, blue jacket and white trousers—the girl would have been very much unlike other girls if she had not been dazzled by this versatile hero, grand in academic magnificence in the morning, and resplendent now in the uniform of the river. "I am so sorry I can't take you out myself," said Val, "for of course I must go with my boat; but I have a man here, the best of fellows, who will row you up to Surly. Here, Brown," he cried, "get out the nicest gig you have, and come yourself—there's a good fellow. I want my cousins

to see everything. Oh, I'll speak to Harry, and make it all right. I want you, and nobody else," he added, looking with friendly eyes at his *protégé*. I don't think Mr Pringle heard this address, but looking round suddenly, he saw a young man standing by Valentine whose appearance made his heart jump. "Good God!" he cried instinctively, staring at him. Dick had grown and developed in these years. He had lost altogether the slouch of the tramp, and was, if not so handsome as Val, trim and well made, with a chest expanded by constant exercise, and his head erect with the constant habit of attention. He was dressed in one of Val's own coats, and no longer looked like a lad on the rafts. For those who did not look closely, he might have been taken for one of Val's schoolfellows, so entirely had he fallen into the ways and manners of "the gentlemen." He was as fair as Val was dark, about the same height, and though not like Val, was so like another face which Mr Pringle knew, that his heart made a jump into his mouth with wonder and terror. Perhaps he might not have remarked this likeness but for the strange association of the two lads, standing side by side as they were, and evidently on the most friendly terms. "Who is that?" cried Mr Pringle, staring with wide-open eyes.

"It is the best fellow in the world," cried Val, laughing, as Dick sprang aside to arrange the cushions in a boat which lay alongside the raft. "He'll take you up to Surly faster than any one else on the river."

"But, Valentine—it is very kind of him," said Vi, hesitating—"but you did not introduce him to us——"

"Oh, he's not a gentleman," said Val, lightly; "that is to say," he added, seeing Dick within reach, with a hasty blush, "he's as good in himself as any one I know; but he ain't one of the fellows, Vi; he works at the rafts—his name is Brown. Now, do you think you can steer? You used to, on the water at home."

"Oh yes," said Violet, with modest confidence. Val stood and looked after them as the boat glided away up the crowded river; then he stalked along through the admiring crowd, feeling as a man may be permitted to feel who holds the foremost rank on a day of *féte* and universal enjoyment.

"To him each lady's look was lent,
On him each courtier's eye was bent."

To be sure there were a great many others almost as exalted as Val ; and only the initiated knew that he rowed in the Eight, and was captain of the Victory,—the best boat on the river. He stalked along to his boat, over the delicious turf of the Brocas, in the afternoon sunshine, threading his way through throngs of ladies in pretty dresses, and hundreds of white-waistcoated Etonians. How proud the small boys who knew him were, after receiving a nod from the demigod as he passed, to discourse loudly to gracious mother or eager sister, Val's style and title ! "That's Ross at my dame's—he's in the Eight—he won the school sculling last summer half ; and we think we'll get the House Fours, now he's captain. He's an awfully jolly fellow when you know him," crowed the small boys, feeling themselves exalted in the grandeur of his acquaintance ; and the pretty sisters looked after Val, a certain awe mingling with their admiration ; while Philistines and strangers, unaccompanied by even a small boy, felt nobodies, as became them. Then came the start up the river. Never was a prettier sight than this ceremonial. The river all golden with afternoon glory ; the great trees on the Brocas expanding their huge boughs in the soft air, against the sky ; the banks all lined with animated, bright-coloured crowds ; the stream alive with attendant boats ; and the great noble pile of the castle looking down serene from its height upon the children and subjects at its royal feet, making merry under its great and calm protection. It is George III.'s birthday—poor, obstinate, kindly old soul !—and this is how a lingering fragrance of kindness grows into a sort of fame. They say he was paternally fond and proud of the boys, who thus yearly, without knowing it, celebrate him still.

Dick took his boat with Val's cousins in it up the river, and waited there among the willows, opposite the beautiful elms of the Brocas, till the "Boats" went past in gay procession. He pointed out Val's boat and Val's person to Violet with a pleasure as great as her own. "It is the best boat on the river, and he is one of the best oars," cried Dick, his honest fair face glowing with pleasure. "We all think his house must win the House Fours—they didn't last year, for Mr Lichen was still here, and he's heavier than Mr Ross ; but Grinder's will have it this time." Dick's face so brightened with generous delight, and acquired an expression so individual and characteristic, that Mr Pringle began to breathe

freely, and to say to himself that fancy had led him astray.

"Do you belong to this place?" he asked, when they started again to follow the boats up the river, in the midst of a gay flotilla, looking Dick very steadily, almost severely, in the face.

"Not by birth, sir," said Dick. "Indeed, I don't belong anywhere; but I'm settled here, I hope, for good."

"But you don't mean to say you are a boatman?" said Mr Pringle; "you don't look like it. It must be a very precarious life."

"I am head man at the rafts," said Dick—"thanks to Mr Ross, who got me taken on when I was a lad"—(he was not quite nineteen then, but maturity comes early among the poor), "and we're boatbuilders to our trade. You should see some of the boats we turn out, sir, if you care for such things."

"But I suppose, my man, you have had a better education than is usual?" said Mr Pringle, looking so gravely at him that Dick thought he must disapprove of such vanities. "You don't speak in the least like the other lads about here."

"I suppose it's being so much with the gentlemen," said Dick, with a smile. "I am no better than the other lads. Mr Ross has given me books—and things."

"Mr Ross must have been very kind to you," said Mr Pringle, with vague suspicions which he could not define—"he must have known you before?"

"Hasn't he just been kind to me!" said Dick, a flush coming to his fair face; "an angel couldn't have been kinder! No, I never saw him till two years ago; but lucky for me, he took a fancy to me—and I, if I may make so bold as to say so, to him."

"Mr Brown," said Violet, looking at him with a kind of heavenly dew in her dark eyes—for to call such effusion of happiness tears would be a word out of place—"I am afraid, if we are going through the lock, I shall not be able to steer."

This was not in the least what she wanted to say. What she wanted to say was, I can see you are a dear, dear, good fellow, and I love you for being so fond of Val; and how Dick should have attained to a glimmering of understanding, and known that this was what she meant, I cannot tell—

but he did. Such things happen now and then even in this stupid everyday world.

"Never mind, Miss," he said cheerfully, looking back at her with his sunshiny blue eyes, "I can manage. Hold your strings fast that you may not lose them: the steerage is never much use in a lock; and if you're nervous, there's the Sergeant, who is a great friend of Mr Ross's, will pull us through."

The lock was swarming with boats, and Violet, not to say her father, who was not quite sure about this mode of progression, looked up with hope and admiration at the erect figure of the Sergeant, brave and fine in his waterman's dress with his silver buttons, and medals of a fiercer service adorning his blue coat. The Sergeant had shed his blood for his country before he came to superintend the swimming of the favoured ones on the Thames. His exploits in the water and those of his pupils are lost to the general public, from the unfortunate fact that English prejudice objects to trammel the limbs of its *natateurs* by any garments. But literature lifts its head in unsuspected places, and the gentle reader will be pleased to learn that the Sergeant's Book on Swimming will soon make the name, which I decline to deliver to premature applauses, known over all the world. He looked to Violet, who was somewhat frightened by the crowds of boats, like an archangel in silver buttons, as he caught the boat with his long pole, and guided them safely through.

I cannot, however, describe in detail all the pretty particulars of the scene, which excited and delighted Violet more than words can tell. Her father was infinitely less interested than usual in her pleasure, having something else in his mind, which he kept turning over and over in his busy brain, while he led her round the supper-table of the boys at Surly, or held her fast during the fireworks at the end of the evening. Was this the other? If it was the other, what motive could the Eskside people have to hide him, to keep him in an inferior station? Did Val know? and if Val knew, how could he be so rash as to present to his natural adversary, a boy who had in every feature Dick Ross's face? Mr Pringle was bewildered with these thoughts. Now and then, when Dick's face brightened into expressiveness, he said to himself that it was all nonsense, that he was crazy on this point, and that any fair lad who appeared by Val's side would im-

mediately look like Richard in his prejudiced eyes. Altogether he was more uncomfortable than I can describe, and heartily glad when the show was over. He took Val by the arm when he came to say good-bye to them, and drew him aside for a moment.

"Does your grandfather know of your intimacy with this lad?" he asked, with the morose tone which his voice naturally took when he was excited.

"Yes, of course they do," said Val, indignant. "I never hid anything from them—why should I?"

"Who is he, then? I think I have a right to know," said Mr Pringle.

"A right to know! I don't understand you," said Val, beginning to feel the fiery blood tingling in his veins; but he thought of Vi, and restrained himself.

"He is Brown," he said, with a laugh; "that's all I know about him. You're welcome to know as much as I do; though as for right, I can't tell who has the right. You can ask the men at the rafts, who have just the same means of information as I."

While this conversation was going on, Violet had spoken softly to Dick. "Mr Brown," she said, being naturally respectful of all strangers, "I am so glad of what you told us about Mr Ross."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Dick; "you could not be more glad to hear than I am to tell. I should like to let every one know that though he's only a boy, he's been the making of me."

"But—I beg your pardon—are you older than a boy?" said Vi.

Dick laughed. "When you have to work for your living, you're a man before you know," he said, with a certain oracular wisdom that sank deeply into Vi's mind. But the next moment her father called her somewhat sharply, and she awoke with a sigh to the consciousness that this wonderful day was over, and that she must go away.

CHAPTER XX.

THIS was Val's last summer at Eton ; he went away with deep regret, as all well-conditioned boys do, and was petted and made much of at home in the interval between his school and his university life. Lady Eskside, who had once carried little Val with her, with care so anxious, was proud and happy beyond description now when Val accompanied her anywhere with that air of *savoir faire* and intimate knowledge of the world which distinguishes his kind. He had already a circle much enlarged from hers, and knew people whom even the Dowager Duchess, who was more in the world than Lady Eskside, could not pretend to know. He was a head taller than good-natured Lord Hightowers, and a thousand times handsomer and better bred. "But not the least like his father," said her Grace, with pointed particularity. "Not so like as he was," said Lady Eskside, not unprepared for this attack ; "but I can still see the resemblance—though the difference of complexion is bewildering to those who don't know both faces so well as I do," she added, with a smile. To be sure, no one else could know the two faces as well as she did. Val was extremely well received in the county, and considered, young as he was, an acquisition to general society ; and was asked far and wide to garden-parties, which were beginning to come into fashion, and to the few dances which occurred now and then. He had to go, too, to various entertainments given by the new people in Lord Eskside's feus. During Val's boyhood, the feus which the old lord and his factor laid out so carefully had been built upon, to the advantage of the shopkeepers in Lasswade, for one thing ; and a row of, on the whole, rather handsome houses, in solid white stone, somewhat urban in architecture for the locality, and built to resist wind and storm for centuries, rose on the crown of the green bank which overlooked the road, and were to be seen from the terrace at Rossraig. There were two ladies in them who gave parties,—one the wife of a retired physician, the other a well-connected widow. Val had to dance at both houses, for the very good reason that the widow was well connected, which made it impossible to refuse her ; while the other house had a vote, more important still. "It

is your business to make yourself agreeable to everybody, Val," said Lord Eskside, feeling, as he looked at the boy's long limbs and broad shoulders, that the time was approaching in which his ambition should at last be gratified, and a Ross be elected for the county, notwithstanding all obstacles. Within the next four or five years a general election was inevitable ; and it was one of the old lord's private prayers that it might not come until Val was eligible. He did all he could to communicate to him that interest in politics which every young man of good family, according to Lord Eskside, should be reared in. Val had been rather inattentive on this point : he held, in an orthodox manner, those conventional and not very intelligent Tory principles which belong to Eton ; but he had not thought much about the subject, if truth must be told, and was rather amused than impressed by Lord Eskside's eloquence. "All right, grand-papa," he would say, with that calm general assent of youth which is so trying to the eager instructor. He was quite ready to accept both position and opinions, but he did not care enough about them to take the trouble of forming any decision for himself.

But he went to Mrs Rintoul's party, and made himself very agreeable ; and not only the retired doctor himself, but what was perhaps more important, his daughters—from Miss Rintoul of five-and-thirty to the little one of sixteen—were ready as one woman to adopt his cause, and wear his colours when the time came. "What does it matter between them, papa ?" said Miss Rintoul, who was very strong-minded. "Tory or Radical—what does it matter ? They are all conservative in office, and destructive out of it. If I had a vote—and at my age it's a disgrace to England that I haven't—I should stand by friends and neighbours. That's a better rule than your old-fashioned Tory and Whig. A good man is the one thing needful ; over whom, if necessary, one can exert intelligent influence," said this enlightened woman. I do not think her papa, who was better aware how very impossible it is to influence any human creature, was entirely of her opinion ; but he informed Willie Maitland that probably on the whole, if no candidate exactly of his own way of thinking appeared in the field, he would not hesitate to support Mr Ross, if he carried out, as there was every reason to expect, the promise of his youth. Thus Val, in gay unconsciousness, was made to begin his canvassing when he

was nineteen, and while still the episode of the university lay between him and public life. Lord Eskside invited a large party for the 1st of September, and the house continued full up to the time of Val's departure for Oxford ; and besides this party of guests at home, there was such a succession of entertainments given at Rossraig as had not been known before for many years,—not since Val's father was on his promotion, like Val. Mary Percival was one of the party during this gay time, aiding Lady Eskside to receive her guests and do the honours of her house. She came when it was definitely ascertained that Richard was not coming, as his parents wished. He wrote that he was deeply occupied, and that in the present state of Italian politics it was impossible that he could leave his post—a letter over which Lady Eskside sighed ; but as Mary came to make up the deficiency, there was something gained to atone for this loss.

Mary, however, never would commit herself to that enthusiasm for Val which his grandmother felt was her boy's due. She liked him very well, she said—oh, very well : he was a nice boy ; she was very glad he had done so well at school, and she hoped he would take a good place at Oxford ; but I leave the reader to judge whether this mild approbation was likely to satisfy the old people, who by this time—husband as well as wife—were, as the servants said, altogether “wrapt up” in Val. Mary offended her friend still more by the perverse interest she took in the Pringle family, and her many visits to the Hewan, where Val was delighted to accompany her as often as she chose to go. Violet was “in residence,” as he said, at the cottage, living a somewhat lonely life there, though the others of the family came and went, spending a day or a night as they could manage it. I do not know if any thought of “falling in love” had ever come into Valentine's boyish head ; but there was a delicate link of affection and interest between Violet and himself which affected him he could not quite tell how. As for poor little Vi, I fear her young imagination had gone further than Valentine's. It was not love in her case, perhaps, any more than in his ; but it was fancy, which at seventeen is almost as strong. I think this was the primary reason of Mary's frequent visits to the Hewan. She saw what was going on in the girl's young head and heart ; and with that intense recollection of the

circumstances which decided her own fate which such gentle-women, thrown out of the common path of life, often have, she had conceived an almost exaggerated anxiety for the fate of Vi, which seemed to be shaping itself after the model of her own.

"I wish my dear old lady would not spoil that boy so," she said one September morning, when she had walked alone through the woods to the Hewan. Her pretty *particular* grey gown (for Mary was not without something of that precise order which it is usual to call old-maidishness, about her dress) was marked here and there with a little spot from the damp ferns and grass, which she rubbed with her handkerchief as she spoke, and which suddenly brought back to Violet's memory that one day of "playing truant" which had been about the sweetest of her life. Mary had perceived that Violet gave a quick look for the other figure which generally followed, and that there was a droop of disappointment about her, when she perceived that her visitor was alone. "I wish she would not spoil that boy so. He is not a bad boy——"

"Is it possible you can mean Val?" said Violet, with dignity, erecting her small head.

"Yes, indeed, my dear, it is quite possible; I do mean Val. He is a good boy enough, if you would not all spoil him with adulation—as if he were something quite extraordinary, and no one had ever seen his like before."

"You do not like Val, Miss Percival—you never did; but he likes you, and always walks with you when you will let him."

"Ah, that is when I am coming here," said Mary, with a momentary compunction. Then perceiving a pleased glow diffuse itself over Vi's face, she added, quickly, "I mean, he likes to go with me when it pleases himself; but if I were to ask any little sacrifice of his will from him, you should see how he would look. He is one of the most self-willed boys I know."

Violet did not make any answer. She patted her foot upon the carpet, and the corners of her little mouth were drawn down. She would have frowned had she known how; as it was, she averted her face in wrath and dismay.

"Violet, my dear, I take a great interest in you," said Mary. "When I look at you, I sometimes think I see my-

self at your age. I don't like to think that you may grow up to make a demigod of Val—or indeed of any other."

"Miss Percival!—I! Oh, how dare you?—how can you say so?" cried Violet, springing to her feet, her face crimson, her eyes shining. "I! make a—anything of Val. Oh, how can you be so unkind, you grown-up people? Must a girl never speak to a boy unless he is her brother? And Val has been just like my brother. I think of him—as I think of Sandy."

"Oh, you little story-teller!" cried Mary, laughing in spite of herself, as Violet's indignant voice faltered into uncertainty; "but, Vi, I am not going to scold—don't be afraid. I am going to tell you for your good what happened to me. I don't like doing it," she said, with a blush that almost neutralised the difference of age between herself and the girl who listened to her; "but I think it may be for your good, dear. Violet, when I was your age there was Some one—whom I was constantly in the habit of seeing, as you might be of seeing Val. There was never any—flirtation or nonsense between us. How shall I say it, Violet?—for I don't care to speak of such things any more than you would. I liked him, as I thought, as you do, like a brother; and he was always kept before me—never any one but Richard. After a while he went out into the world, and there did—something which separated us for ever! oh, not anything wrong, Vi—not a crime, or even vice—but something which showed me that I, and all I was, such as I was, was nothing in the world to him—that nothing was of value to him but his own caprice. I never got over it, Violet. You see me now growing old, unmarried; and of course I never shall marry now, nor have young ones round me like your mother—"

"Oh, dear Miss Percival," cried Violet, with tears in her eyes, "who cares for being married? What has that to do with it? Is it not far finer, far grander, to live like you, for ever constant to your first love? Is not that the best of all?" cried the little enthusiast, flushing with visionary passion. Mary caught her by her pretty shoulders, shook her and kissed her, and laughed, and let one or two tears drop, a tribute, half to her own, half to the child's excitement.

"You little goose!" she cried. "Vi, I saw him after, years after—such a man to waste one's life for!—a poor petty *dilettante*, more fond of a bit of china than of child or

wife, or love or honour. Ah, Vi, you don't understand me! but to think I might have been the mother of a child like you, but for that poor creature of a man!"

"Oh, don't, don't!" cried Vi, putting her hands to her ears; "I will not listen to you, now. If you—loved him," said the girl, hesitating and blushing at the word, "you never, never could speak of him like that."

"I never—never could have been deceived in him,—is that what you mean? Vi, I hope you will never follow my example."

"Hollo!" cried another voice of some one coming in at the door, which stood open all day long, as cottage doors do—"is there any one in—is Mary here? Are you in, Vi?" and Val's head, glowing with a run up the brae, bright with life and mirth, and something which looked very much like boyish innocence and pleasure, looked in suddenly at the parlour door. Val was struck by consternation when he saw the agitated looks which both endeavoured to hide. "What's the row?" he asked, coming in with his hat in his hand. "You look as if you had been crying. What have you been doing, Mary, to Vi?"

"Scolding her," said Miss Percival, laughing. "I hope you have no objection, Val."

"But I have great objections; nobody shall bother Violet and make her cry, if I can help it. She never did anything in her life to deserve scolding. Vi," cried Val, turning to her suddenly, "do you remember the day we played truant? If Mary hadn't been here, I meant to carry you off again into the woods."

Violet looked up first at him and then at Mary; the first glance was full of delight and tender gratitude, the other was indignant and defiant. "Is this the boy you have been slandering?" Vi's eyes said, as plain as eyes could speak, to her elder friend. Miss Percival rose and made the gentleman a curtsy.

"If Mary is much in your way, she will go; but as Vi is a young lady now, perhaps Mary's presence would be rather an advantage than otherwise. I put myself at your orders, young people, for the woods, or wherever you like."

"Well," said Val, with the composure of his age, "perhaps it might be as well if you would come too. Run to the larder, Violet, and look if there's a pie. I'll go and coax Jean for the old basket—the very old basket that we had on

that wonderful day. Quick! and your cloak, Vi." He rushed away from them like a whirlwind; and soon after, while the two ladies were still looking at each other in doubt whether he should be humoured or not, Jean's voice was heard approaching round the corner from her nest.

" Pie! set you up with dainty dishes! Na, Mr Valentine, you'll get nae pie from me, though you have the grace to come and ask for it this time; but I'll make you some sandwiches, if you like, for you've a tongue like the very deil himself. Oh ay—go away with your phrases. If you were not wanting something you would take little heed o' your good Jean, your old friend."

" Listen," said Mary to Vi.

" No that ye're an ill laddie, when a's said. You're not one of the mim-mouthing ones, like your father before yon; but I wouldna say but you were more to be lippened to, with all your noise and your nonsense. There, go away with you. I'll do the best I can, and you'll take care of missie. Here's your basket till ye, ye wild lad."

Vi had grasped Mary's arm in return when old Jean continued; but being pitiful, the girl in her happiness would not say anything to increase what she felt must be the pain of the woman by her side. Vi had divined easily enough that it was Valentine's father of whom Mary spoke; and the child pitied the woman, who was old enough to be her mother. Ah, had it but been Valentine! He never would disappoint any one—never turn into a *dilettante*, loving china better than child or wife. She kissed Mary in a little outburst of pity—pity so angelic that Violet almost longed to change places with her, that she might see and prove for herself how different Valentine was. As for Mary, she made herself responsible for this mad expedition with a great confusion and mingling of feelings. She went, she said to herself, to prevent harm; but some strange mixture of a visionary maternity, and of a fellow-feeling quite incompatible with her mature age, was in her mind at the same time. She said to herself, with a sigh, as she went down the slope, that she might have been the boy's mother, and let her heart soften to him, as she had never done before; though I think this same thought it was which had made her feel a little instinctive enmity to him, because he was not her son but another woman's. How lightly the boy and girl tripped along over the woodland paths, waiting for her at every corner, chat-

tering their happy nonsense, filling the sweet, mellow, waving woods with their laughter ! They pushed down to the river, though the walk was somewhat longer than Mary cared for, and brought her to the glade in which the two runaways had eaten their dinner, and where Vi had been found asleep on Val's shoulder. "It looks exactly as it did then ; but how different we are !" cried Violet, on the warm green bank where her shoes and stockings had been put to dry. Mary sat down on the sunny grass, and watched them as they poked into all the corners they remembered, and called to them with maternal tremblings, when the boy once more led the girl across the stepping-stones to the great boulder by the side of which Esk foamed and flashed. She asked herself, was it possible that this bold brown boy would ever turn out to be like his father ? and tried to recollect whether Richard had ever been so kind, so considerate of any one's comfort as Val was of Vi's. Was it perhaps possible that, instead of her own failure, this romance, so prettily begun, might come to such a climax of happiness as romances all feign to end in ? Mary, I fear, though she was so sensible, became slightly foolish as she sat under the big beech, and looked at the two in the middle of the stream together, Esk roaring by over his rocks, and making the words with which she called them back quite inaudible. How handsome Val looked, and how pretty and poetic his little companion ! The bank of wood opposite was all tinted with autumn colour, rich and warm. It was a picture which any painter would have loved, and it went to Mary's heart.

"But you are too big, Val, to play at the Babes in the Wood nowadays," said old Lady Eskside, with a little wrinkle in her brow, when she heard of the freak ; "and I wonder the Pringles leave that poor little thing by herself at the Hewan, sometimes for days together. They say it's for her health ; but I think it would be much better for her health if she were under her mother's eye."

"You must remember that I was with them," said Mary, "representing her mother, or a middle-aged supervision at least."

"My dear," said Lady Eskside, half angry, half smiling, as she shook her finger at her favourite, "I have my doubts that you are just a romantic gowk ; though you might know better."

"Yes, I might know better—if experience could teach,"

said Mary ; but experience so seldom teaches, notwithstanding all that is said to the contrary. And Mary could not but reflect that Lady Eskside had not frowned, but smiled, upon her own delusion. Perhaps in such cases parental frowns are safer than smiles.

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE was a great dinner at Rossraig before Val went to Oxford : as much fuss made about him, the neighbours began to say, as was made for his father who came home so seldom, and had distinguished himself in diplomacy, and turned out to be a man of whom the county could be proud ; whereas Val was but an untried boy going to college, of whom no one could as yet say how he would turn out. Mr Pringle was invited to this great ceremonial, partly by way of defiance to show him how popular the heir was, and partly (for the two sentiments are not incapable of conjunction) out of kindness, as recognising his relationship. He came, and he listened to the remarks, couched in mysterious terms, yet comprehensible enough, which were made as to Val's future connection with the county, in grim silence. After dinner, when the ladies had retired, and as the wine began to circulate, these allusions grew broader, and at length Mr Pringle managed to make out very plainly that old Lord Eskside was already electioneering, though his candidate was but nineteen, and for the moment there was very little chance of a new election. Val, careless of the effect he was intended to produce, and quite unconscious of his grandfather's motives, was letting loose freely his boyish opinions, all marked, as we have said, with the Eton mark, which may be described as Conservative in the gross, with no very clear idea what the word means in detail, but a charming determination to stick to it, right or wrong. Lord Eskside smiled benignly upon these effusions, and so did most of his guests. "He has the root of the matter in him," said the old lord, addressing Sir John, who was as anxious as himself to have "a good man" elected for the county, but who had no son, grandson, or nephew of his own ;

and Sir John nodded back in genial sympathy. Mr Pringle, however, as was natural, being on the opposite side from the Rosses in everything, was also on the other side in politics, and maintained an eloquent silence during this part of the entertainment. He bided his time, and when there came a lull in the conversation (a thing that will happen occasionally), he made such an interpellation as showed that his silence arose from no want of inclination to speak.

"Your sentiments are most elevated, Valentine," he said, "but your practice is democratical to an extent I should scarcely have looked for from your father's son. I hope your friend the boatman at Eton is flourishing—the one you introduced to my daughter and me?"

"A boatman at Eton," said the old lord, bending his brows, "introduced to Violet? You are dreaming, Pringle. I hope Val knows better than that."

"Indeed I think it shows very fine feeling on Valentine's part—this was one of nature's noblemen, I gathered from what he said."

"Nature's fiddlestick!" exclaimed Lord Eskside, and the Tory gentlemen pricked up their ears. There was scarcely one of them who did not recollect, or find himself on the eve of recollecting, at that moment, that Val's mother was "not a lady," and that blood would out.

"I introduced him to you as a boatman, sir," said Val, "not as anything else; though as for noblemen, Brown is worth twenty such as I have known with handles to their names. We get to estimate people by their real value at Eton, not by their accidental rank," said the youth splendidly, at which Mr Pringle cried an ironical "Hear, hear!"

"Gently, gently, my young friend," said Sir John. "Rank is a great power in this world, and not to be lightly spoken of; it does not become you to speak lightly of it; and it does not agree with your fine Tory principles, of which I warmly approve."

"What have Tory principles to do with it?" said Val. "A fellow may be rowdy or a snob though he is a lord; and in that case at Eton, sir, whatever may happen at other places, we give him the cold shoulder. I don't mean to set up Eton for an example," said Val, gravely, at which there was a general roar.

"Bravo, bravo, my young Tory!" cried the Duke himself, no less a person, who on that night honoured Lord Eskside's

table. "In that respect, if you are right, Eton *is* an example, let any one who pleases take the other side."

"If Wales had been at Eton, and had been *wowdy*, we'd have sent him to Coventry as soon as look at him," said Lord Hightowers, smoothing an infantile down on his upper lip.

"A very fine sentiment; but I don't know if the antagonistic principle would work," said Mr Pringle. "I am a Liberal, as everybody knows; but I don't care about admitting boatmen to my intimacy, however much I may contemn an unworthy peer."

"Did Brown intrude upon you?" said Valentine, bewildered; "was he impudent? did he do anything he oughtn't to? Though I could almost as soon believe that I had behaved like a cad myself, if you say so I'll go down directly and kick the fellow." And poor Valentine, flushed and excited, half rose from his seat.

"Bwown!" said Lord Hightowers from the other side of the table. "Beg your pardon, but you're mistaken; you must be mistaken. Bwown! best fellow that ever lived. Awfully sorry he's not a gentleman; but for a cad—no, not a cad—a common sort of working fellow, he's the nicest fellow I ever saw. Couldn't have been impudent—not possible. It ain't in him, eh, Ross? or else I'd go and kick him too with pleasure," said the young aristocrat calmly.

Between the fire of these two pairs of young eyes, Mr Pringle was somewhat taken aback.

"Oh, he was not impudent; on the contrary, a well-informed nice young fellow. My only wonder was, that young gentlemen of your anti-democratical principles should make a bosom friend of a man of the people—that's all. For my part, I think it does you infinite credit," said Mr Pringle, blandly. "I hope you have been having good sport at Castleton, Lord Hightowers. You ought to have come out to my little moor at Dalrulzian, Val. I don't know when the boys have had better bags."

And thus the conversation fell back into its ordinary channels; indeed it had done so before this moment, the battle about Brown having quickly failed to interest the other members of the party. Lord Eskside sat bending his brows and straining his mind to hear, but as he had the gracious converse of a Duke to attend to, he could

not actually forsake that potentate to make out the chatter of the boys with his adversary. Thus Mr Pringle fired his first successful shot at Val. The Tory gentlemen forgot the story, but they remembered to have heard something or other of a love of low company on the part of Valentine Ross, "which, considering that nobody ever knew who his mother was, was perhaps not to be wondered at," some of the good people said. When Lady Eskside heard of it, she was so much excited by the malice of the suggestion, and expressed her feelings so forcibly, that Val blazed up into one of his violent sudden passions, and was rushing out to show Mr Pringle himself what was thought of his conduct, when his grandfather caught him and arrested him. "Do you want to make fools of us all with your intemperate conduct, sir?" cried the old lord, fire flashing from under his heavy brows. "It is only a child that resents a slight like this—a man must put up with a great deal and make no sign. 'Let the galled jade wince; my withers are unwrung.' That is the sort of sentiment that becomes us." I don't know if this good advice would have mollified Val but for the sudden appearance just then at one of the windows which opened on the terrace, of Violet in her blue gown, whose innocent eyes turned to them with a look which seemed to say, "Don't, oh don't, for my sake!" Of course Violet knew nothing about it, and meant nothing by her looks. It was the expression habitual to her, that was all; but as the old man and the young, one hot with fury, the other calming down his rage, perceived the pretty figure outside, the old lord dropped, as if it burned him, his hold on Val's arm, and Val himself stopped short, and, so to speak, lowered his weapons. "Is my lady in, please?" said Violet through the glass—which was all she had wanted to ask, with those sweet imploring looks. They opened the window for her eagerly, and she stepped in like something dropped out of the sky, in her blue gown, carrying her native colour with her. After this Val could not quite make out what it was that he had against Mr Pringle, until Violet in her innocence brought the subject up.

"Mamma was scolding papa for something—something about Valentine," said Violet. "I did not hear what it was."

"Indeed your papa seems to have spoken in far from a nice spirit, my dear, though I don't like to say it to you,"

said Lady Eskside. "What was it about, Val? some boatman whom he called your bosom friend?"

"Oh!" cried Violet, clasping her hands together, "it must have been Mr Brown. Papa used to talk of him for long and long after."

"And did *you* think, Violet," said the old lady, severely, "that my boy made him his bosom friend?"

"Oh, Lady Eskside! he was so nice and so grateful to Val. I took such a fancy to him," cried Vi, with a blush and a smile, "because he was so grateful. He said Mr Ross had done everything for him. Bosom friend! He looked—I don't think I ever saw a man look so before—women do sometimes," said Violet, with precocious comprehension—"as if he would have liked to be hurt or done some harm to for Val's sake."

"It is the boy I told you about, grandma," said Val—"the one that Grinder made himself disagreeable about; as if a fellow couldn't try to be of use to any other fellow without being had up! He rowed them up the river on the 4th of June. He ain't my bosom friend," he added, laughing; "but I'd rather have him to stand by me in a crowd than any one I know—so that Mr Pringle was right."

"But he did not mean it so; it was ill-meant, it was ill-meant!" cried Lady Eskside. Violet looked at them both with entreating looks.

"Papa may have said something wrong, but I am sure he did not mean it," said Vi, with the dew coming to her pretty eyes. Lady Eskside shook her head; but as for Val, his anger had stolen away out of his heart like the moisture on the grass when the sun comes out; but the sun at the moment had an azure radiance shining out of a blue gown.

After this Val went off to the University with a warm sense of his approaching manhood, and a new independence of feeling. He went to Balliol naturally, as the college of his country, and there fell into the hands of Mr Gerald Grinder, who had condescended to be the boy's private tutor long ago, just before he attained to the glories of his fellowship. Boys were thus passed up along the line among the Grinder family, which had an excellent connection, and threw well. Val was not clever enough nor studious enough to furnish the ambitious heads of his college with a future first-class man; but as he had one great and well-established quality, they received him with more than ordi-

nary satisfaction ; for even at Balliol, has not the most sublime of colleges a certain respect for its place on the river ? I have heard of such a thing as a Boating scholarship, the nominal examination for which is made very light indeed to famous oars ; but anyhow, Val, though perhaps a very stiff matriculation paper might have floored him, got in upon comparatively easy terms. I will not say much about his successes, nor even insist on the fact that Oxford was an easy winner on the river that triumphant day when Lichen rowed stroke and Val bow in the University boat, and all the small Etonians roared so, under their big hats, that it was a mercy none of them exploded. Val did well, though not brilliantly, in his University career, as he had done at Eton. He had a little difficulty now and then with his hasty temper, but otherwise came to no harm ; and thus, holding his own in intellectual matters, and doing more than hold his own in other points that rank quite as high in Oxford, as in the rest of the academical world, made his way to his majority. I believe it crossed Lord Eskside's mind now and then to think that in Parliament it was very soon forgotten whether a man had been bow or even stroke of the 'Varsity boat ; and that it could count for little in political life, and for less than nothing with the sober constituency of a Scotch county ; but then, as all the youth of England, and all the instructors of that youth, set much store by the distinction, even an anxious parent (not to say grandfather) is mollified. "What good will all that nonsense do him ?" the old lord would growl, working his shaggy eyebrows, as he read in the papers, even the most intellectual, a discussion of Val's sinews and breadth of chest and "form" before the great race was rowed. "At least it cannot do him any harm," said my lady, always and instantly on the defensive ; "and I don't see why you should grudge our boy the honour that other folks' boys would give their heads for." "Other folks' boys may be foolish if they like—I am concerned only for my own," said Lord Eskside ; "what does the county care for his bow-ing or his stroke-ing ? it's a kind of honour that will stand little wear and tear, however much you may think of it, my lady." But to tell the truth, I don't think my lady in her soul did think very much of it, except in so far that it was her principle to stand up for most things that pleased Val.

In the meantime, however, the departure of Val from

Eton had produced a much more striking effect upon some nameless persons than on any of his other friends. Dick missed him with unfeigned and unconcealed regret. He insisted upon carrying his bag to the station for him; notwithstanding the cab which conveyed Val's other effects; and went home again in very depressed spirits, after having bidden him good-bye. But Dick's depression was nothing to that with which his mother sat gazing blankly over the river, with that look in her eyes which had for some time departed from them—that air of looking for something which she could not find, which had made her face so remarkable. She had never quite lost it, it is true; but the hope which used to light up her eyes of seeing, however far off, that one boat which she never failed to recognise shooting up or down the stream, had softened her expression wonderfully, and brought her back, as it were, to the things surrounding her. Val, though she saw so little of him, was as an anchor of her heart to the boy's mother. The consciousness that he was near, that she should hear his name, see the shadow of him flitting across the brightness of the river, or that even when he was absent, a few weeks would bring back those dim and forlorn delights to her, kept the wild heart satisfied. This strange visionary absorption in the boy she had given up did not lessen her attachment to the boy she retained—the good Dick, who had always been so good a son to her. She thought that she had totally given up Val; and certainly she never hoped, nor even desired, any more of him than she had from her window. Indeed, in her dim perpetual ponderings on this subject, the poor soul had come to feel that it could be no comfort, but much the reverse, to Val, to find out that she was his mother. Had any hope of the possibility of revealing herself to him ever been in her mind, it would have disappeared after their first interview. After that she had always kept in the background on the occasions when he came to see Dick, and had received his "Good morning" without anything but a curtsey. No, alas! a gentleman like that, with all the consciousness about him of a position so different,—with that indescribable air of belonging to the highest class which the poor tramp-woman recognised at once, remembering her brief and strange contact with it—a gentleman like that to have a mother like herself revealed to him—a mother from the road, from the fairs and racecourses! She almost cried

out with fright when she thought of the possibility, and made a vow to herself that never, never would she expose Valentine to this horror and shame. No! she had made her bed, and she must lie upon it.

But when he went away, the visionary support which had sustained her visionary nature—the something out of herself which had kept her wild heart satisfied—failed all at once. It was as if a blank had suddenly been spread before the eyes that were always looking for what they could find no more. She never spoke of it—never wept, nor made any demonstration of the change; but she flagged in her life and her spirit all at once. Her work, which she had up to this time got through with an order and swiftness strangely at variance with all the habits which her outdoor life might have been supposed to form, began to drag, and be a weariness to her. She had no longer the inducement to get it over, to be free for the enjoyment of her window. Sometimes she would sit drearily down in the midst of it, with her face turned to the stream by a forlorn habit, and thus Dick would find her sometimes when he came in to dinner. "You are not well, mother," the lad said, anxiously. "Oh yes, quite well; the likes of me is never ill—till we die," she would say, with a dreamy smile. "You have too much work, mother," said Dick; "I can't have you working so hard—have a girl to help you; we've got enough money to afford it, now I'm head man." "Do you think I've gone useless, then?" she would ask, with some indignation, rousing herself; and thus these little controversies always terminated.

But Dick watched her, with a wonder growing in his mind. She was very restless during the autumn, yet when the dark days of winter came, relapsed into a half-stupefied quiet. Even when Val was at Eton, he had of course been invisible on the river during the winter. "The spring will be the pull," Dick said to himself, wondering, with an anguish which it would be difficult to describe, whether it was his duty to pull up the stakes of this homely habitation, which he had fixed as he thought so securely for himself, and to abandon his work and his living, and the esteem of his neighbours, to resume for her sake the wanderings which he loathed; could it be his duty? A poor lad, reared at the cost of visible privations by a very poor mother, has a better idea of the effort and of the sacrifice made for him, than a

young man of a higher class for whom even more bitter sacrifices may have been made. Dick knew what it must have cost the poor tramp-woman to bring him up as she had done, securing him bread always, keeping him from evil communications, even having him taught a little in his childhood. For a tramp to have her child taught to read and write involves as much as Eton and Oxford would to another ; and Dick was as much above the level of his old companions in education as a university prizeman is above the common mass ; and he knew what it must have cost her, therein having an advantage over many boys, who never realise what they have cost their parents till these parents are beyond all reach of gratitude. Was it, then, his duty to give up everything, his own very life, and open the doors of her prison-house to this woman to whom he owed his life ? Such questions come before many of us in this world, and have to be solved one way or other. Our own life, independence, and use ; or the happiness of those who have guarded and reared us, though without giving up their all to us, as we are called upon to do for them. Perhaps it is a question which women have to decide upon more often than men. Dick thrust it away from him as long as he could, trying not to think of it, and watching his mother with an anxiety beyond words, as the days lengthened, and the spring freshness came back, and the Brocas elms got their first wash of green. Sometimes he saw her give an unconscious gasp as if for breath, as though the confined air of the room stifled her. Sometimes he found her half bent out of the open window, with her rapt eyes gazing, not at the river, but away over the distant fields. She got paler and thinner every day before his eyes ; and he owed everything (he thought) to her, and what was he to do ?

What the sacrifice would have been to Dick, I dare not calculate. In these three years he had become known to everybody about, and was universally liked and trusted. He was his master's right-hand man. He had begun to know what comfort was, what it was to have a little money, (delightful sensation !) what it was to get on in the world. The tramp-boys about the roads, and the new lads who were taken on at the rafts, attracted his sympathy, but it was the sympathy of a person on a totally different level—who had indeed been as they were, but who had long gone over their heads, and was of a class and of habits totally different.

Had Lord Hightowers been called upon to divest himself of his title, and become simple John Seton in an engineer's workshop, the humiliation would not have been comparable to that which Dick would have endured had he been compelled to degrade himself again into a vagrant, a frequenter of fairs and races. Indeed I think Lord Hightowers would rather have liked the change, being of a mechanical turn,—while to Dick the thought was death. It made him sick and faint to think of the possibility. But, on the other hand, was he to let his mother pine and die like a caged eagle ? or let her go away from him, to bear all the inevitable privations alone ?

One day the subject was finally forced upon his consideration in such a way that he could not disregard it. When he went home to his early dinner, she was gone. Everything was arranged for him with more care than usual, his meal left by the fire, his table laid, and the landlady informed him that his mother had left word she would not be back till night. Dick did not run wildly off in search of her, as some people would have done. He had to look after his work, whatever happened. He swallowed his dinner hastily, a prey to miserable thoughts. It had come then at last, this misfortune which he had so long foreseen ! Could he let her wander off alone to die of cold and weariness behind some hedge ? After the three years' repose, her change of habits, and the declining strength which he could not deceive himself about, how could she bear those privations alone ? No, it was impossible. Dick reviewed the whole situation bitterly enough, poor fellow. He knew what everybody would say : how it was the vagrant blood breaking out in him again ; how it was, once a tramp always a tramp ; how it was a pity—but a good thing, on the whole, that he had done nothing wild and lawless before he left. And some would regret him, Dick thought, brushing his hand across his eyes—“the gentlemen” generally, among whom he had many fast friends. Dick decided that he would do nothing rash. He would not give up his situation, and give notice of leaving to the landlady, till he had first had a talk with his mother ; but he “tidied” the room after his solitary dinner with a forlorn sense of the general breaking up of all his comforts—and went to his afternoon's work with a heavy heart.

It was quite late when she came home. He could hear

by her steps upon the stair that she was almost too tired to drag one foot after another, as he ran to open the door for her. Poor soul ! she came in carrying a basket of primroses, which she held out to him with a pathetic smile. "Take them, Dick ; I've been far to get 'em, and you used to be fond of them when you were little," she said, dropping wearily into the nearest seat. She was pale, and had been crying, he could see ; and her abstract eyes looked at him humbly, beseechingly, like the eyes of a dumb creature, which can express a vague anguish but cannot explain.

"Was it for *them* you went, mother ?" cried Dick, with momentary relief : but this was turned into deeper distress when she shook her head, and burst out into a low moaning and crying that was pitiful to hear.

"No," she said,— "no, no, it wasn't for them ; it was to try my strength ; and I can't do it, Dick—I can't do it, no more, never no more. The strength has gone out of me. I'm dying for free air and the road—but I can't do it, no more, no more !"

Poor Dick went and knelt down by her side, and took her hand into his. He was glad, and conscience-stricken, and full of pity for her, and understanding of her trouble. "Hush, mother ! hush !" he said ; "don't cry. You're weakly after the long winter, as I've seen you before——"

"No, lad, no," she cried, rocking herself in her chair ; "no, I'll never be able for it again—no more, no more !"

Dick never said a word of the tumult in his own mind : he tried to comfort her, prophesying—though heaven knows how much against his own interests !—that she would soon feel stronger, and coaxed her to eat and drink, and at length prevailed upon her to go to bed. Now that they had become comparatively rich, she had the little room behind which had once been Dick's, and he was promoted to a larger chamber up-stairs. He sat up there, poor fellow, as long as he could keep awake, wondering what he must do. Could it be that he was glad that his mother was less strong ? or was it his duty to lose no time further, but to take her away by easy stages to the open air that was necessary for her, and the fields that she loved ? Dick's heart contracted, and bitter tears welled up into his eyes. But he felt that he must think of himself no longer, only of her. That was the one thing self-evident, which required no reasoning to make clear.

The next day a letter came from Valentine Ross, the first sign of his existence all this time, which changed entirely the current of affairs.

CHAPTER XXII.

VAL's letter was of a character sufficiently exciting to have made Dick forget anything less important than the crisis which had thus arrived. Its object was to invite him to Oxford, to a place somewhat similar to that which he had held at Eton, in one of the great boating establishments on the river. The master was old, and wanted somebody of trust to superintend and manage his business, with a reasonable hope of succeeding to him. "You had better come up and talk it over," wrote Val, ever peremptory. "I have always said you must rise in the world, and here is the opportunity for you. They have too much regard for you at Eton to keep you from doing what would be so very advantageous; therefore come up at once and look after it." Dick's heart, which had been beating very low in his honest breast, overwhelmed with fear and forebodings, gave one leap of returning confidence; but then he reflected that his mother must be made the final judge, and with a sickening pang of suspense he "knocked off" his work, and rowed himself across to the little house at the corner. His mother was wearied and languid with her long walk on the day before. She had paused in the midst of her morning occupations, and Dick found her seated in the middle of the room, with her back turned to the window, and her face supported on her hands. She was gazing at the wall opposite, much as she gazed into the distant landscape, not seeing it, but longing to see through it—to see something she could not see. She started when Dick came in, and smiled at him deprecating and humble. "I was resting a moment," she said, with an air of apology that went to his heart. "Have you forgotten something, Dick?"

"No, mother, but I've heard of something," he said, taking out his letter. This made her sit upright, and flushed her cheek suddenly with a surprised alarm for which

he could not account—for which she herself could not account; for it was perhaps the first time in her life that it had occurred to her what would happen if Dick found out the secret of his own story. The possibility of Valentine doing so had crossed her mind, and she had shrunk from it. But what if Dick should find out? the idea had never entered her imagination before.

“It’s a letter from Mr Ross, mother,” said Dick, steadily looking at her. “He says he has heard of a place for me at Oxford where he is himself—a place where I should be almost master at once, have everything to manage, and might succeed, and get it into my own hands. Mother! that would please you? Now to think you should like *that* when you can’t endure this! It would be the same kind of place.”

“Don’t be hard upon me, Dick,” she said, faltering, and turning away her eyes that he might not see the strange light in them—which she was herself aware must be too remarkable to be overlooked. “I can’t answer for my feelings. It’s a change, I suppose—a change that I want. My old way I can’t go back to, for more things than one. I’m too weak and old; and more than that, I’m changed in my mind. Dick, I think it will be a comfort to you to tell you. It ain’t only my limbs, boy, nor my strength. My mind’s changed; I couldn’t go on the tramp again.”

“No, mother? thank God!”

“I don’t thank God,” she said, shaking her head. “I am not glad; but so it is, and I want a change. Let us go, boy. Please God, I’ll be happier there.”

“Mother,” said Dick, anxiously, “your looks are changed all at once. I’m going to ask you a curious question. Has it anything to do with—Mr Ross?”

She made no answer for the moment, but leant her head upon her hands, and looked vaguely at the wall.

“I know it’s a curious question,” repeated Dick, with an attempt at a smile. “But you were satisfied as long as he was here; and since he’s gone you have fallen back—only since he’s gone! You never got that longing sort of look while he was here. What has Mr Ross to do with you and me? Mother—don’t you suppose I think it’s anything wrong, for I don’t—but what has he to do with you and me?”

“Nothing—nothing, Dick,” she cried—“nothing; never will have, never can have. Don’t ask me. When I was

young, when I was a girl, I knew his—people—his—father. There, that's all. I never meant to have said as much. There is nothing wrong. Yes, I suppose it's him I miss somehow. Not that he is half to me, or quarter to me, that you are—or anything to me at all."

"It's very strange," said Dick, troubled; "and somehow I feel for him as I never felt for anybody else. You knew his—father——?"

"I won't have any questions from you, Dick," she cried passionately, rising from her chair. "I told you I knew his—people. Some time or other I'll tell you how I knew them; but not now."

"I wonder does he know anything about it," said Dick, speaking more to himself than her. "It's very strange; he said he thought you were a lady, mother; and that he had seen you before——"

"Did he? God bless him!" cried the woman, surprised by sudden tears. "But I ain't a lady—I ain't a lady," she added, under her breath; "he was wrong there."

"You have some lady ways, mother, now and again," said Dick, pondering. "It is strange. If you knew his people, as you say, does he know?"

"Not a word, Dick, and he mustn't know. Remember, if it was my last word—he mustn't know! Promise me you'll not speak. If he knew and they knew—they'd—I don't know what they mightn't do. Dick, you will never betray your mother?—you will never—never——"

"Hush, mother dear; you are worrying yourself for nothing," said her gentle boy. "If there's nothing wrong, what could they or anybody do? Of course, I won't say a word. All the safer," he added, with a laugh, "because I don't know what words to say. When you keep me dark, mother, I can't give out any light to other people, can I? It's the surest way."

She took no notice of this implied reproof, the most severe that had ever come from Dick's gentle lips. She was another creature altogether from the languid woman whom he had found sitting there in the midst of the untidy room. A new light had come into her eyes—all her stupor and weariness were over. Dick was startled, and he was a trifle hurt at the same time, which was natural enough. If there had been any material for jealousy in him, I think it must have developed at that moment—for all his love had not called forth

from his mother one tittle of the feeling which to all appearance an utter stranger awoke. Dick sighed, but his nature was not in the smallest degree self-contemplative ; and he shook the momentary feeling away ere it had time to take form. "If I can get leave, I'll go up to Oxford and see about it to-morrow," he said. When he had come to this conclusion, he went towards the door to return to his work, leaving her active and revived, both in mind and body. But he stopped before he reached it, and turned back. "Mother," he said, with a little solemnity, "Mr Ross will be only about two years at Oxford. What shall we do when he goes away? We cannot follow him about wherever he goes."

"God knows," she said, stopping short in her sweeping. "Perhaps the world may end before then ; perhaps —. We can't tell," she added solemnly, bowing her head as if to supreme destiny, "what may happen any day or any year. It's all in God's hand."

Dick went away without another word. He arranged to go to Oxford, and did so, and found Val, and finally made an agreement to take the situation offered him ; but this little prick to his pride and affection rankled in his mind. Why should Mr Ross be so much more to her than himself, her son, who had never left her side? "It is strange," he said, with a sense of injury, which grew fainter every moment, yet still lingered. He looked at Val with more interest than ever, and a curious feeling of somehow belonging to him. What could the link be? Dick knew very little about his own history ; he did not know whose son he was, nor what his mother had been. The idea, indeed, gleamed across his mind that Val's father might have been his own father, and this thought gave him no such thrill of pain and shame as it would naturally have brought to a young man brought up in a different class. Dick, with the terrible practical knowledge of human nature which belongs to the lower levels of society, knew that such things happened often enough ; and if he felt a little movement in his mind of unpleasant feeling, he was neither horrified by the suggestion of such a possibility, nor felt his mother lowered in his eyes. Whatever the facts were, they were beyond his ken ; and it was not for him to judge them. Pondering it over, however, he came to feel with a little relief that this could not be the solution. He knew what the manners of his class were, and he knew that his mother

had always been surrounded by that strange abstract atmosphere of reserve and modesty which no one else of her degree resembled her in. No, that could not be the explanation. Perhaps she had recognised in Val the son of some love of her youth whom she had kept in her thoughts throughout all her rougher life. This was a strangely visionary hypothesis, and Dick felt how unreal it was ; but what other explanation could he make ?

The situation at Oxford was a great "rise in the world" to Dick. It was a place of trust, with much better wages than he had at Eton, and a little house close to the river-side. His Eton employer grumbled a little, and said something about a want of gratitude, as employers are so apt to do ; but eventually it was all arranged to Dick's satisfaction and benefit. He and his mother took possession of the little house in May, so quickly was the bargain made ; and when she made her first appearance at Oxford, she had put off the last lingering remnants of the tramp, and looked after the furniture and fittings-up with a languid show of pleasure in them, such as she had never exhibited before. She changed her dress, too, to Dick's infinite pleasure. She put off the coloured handkerchief permanently from her head, and adopted a head-dress something of the same shape, —a kerchief of white net tied under her chin, which threw up her still beautiful face, and impressed every one who saw her with Val's idea that she had been a lady once. This strange head-gear, and the plain black gown without flounces or ornament which she wore constantly, made people think her some sort of a nun ; and the new man at Styles' and his mother became notable on the river-side. They had a little garden to the house, and this, too, seemed to please her. She filled it with common sweet-smelling flowers, and worked in it with a new-born love for this corner of earth which she could call hers ; and every day she stood looking over her little garden-wall, and saw Val and his boat go by. This kept the rhythm of her life in cadence, and she was livelier and more ready in conversation and intercourse with her good son than she had ever been before.

As for Val, after the kind thought which made him send for Dick and warmly plead his cause with the boat-builder on the river-side, there were moments when he felt a certain embarrassment about what he had done. Dick, too, had changed, as well as himself. He could not speak to him as

of old, or give him half-crowns, or trust to him to do whatever he wished. In the last case, indeed, he might have trusted Dick entirely ; for his gratitude, and what is more, his affection, for his young patron, was unbounded. But Val no longer liked to suggest what Dick would have been but too happy to do. The vagrant whom he had taken up had become in a manner Val's equal. He was wiser than the other, though he did not know a tenth part so much ; and though he owed everything he was to Val's boyish interposition in his favour, yet he had a great deal in him which Val had not originated, and which, indeed, was quite beyond him. The undergraduate of high degree did not know how to treat the young man who was still so lowly. He could not ask him to his rooms, or bid him to eat at his own table, half out of a lingering social prejudice, half because he had an uncomfortable knowledge of what people would say. He was as much his friend as ever, but he did not know how to show it. Now and then he went to the little house, but Dick's mother gave him sensations so very strange that he did not care to go often ; and had he gone very often, his tutor, no doubt, would have taken notice of the fact, and set it down to a love of low society, as his Eton tutor had done ; altogether, the situation was full of embarrassment, and the intercourse not half so easy as it had been. To be sure, the external advantages were certain ; Dick had a much better situation and a bright prospect before him, and this was so much gained. Val's advice to him about rising in the world had been wonderfully carried out. He had risen in the world, and got on the steps of the ladder. Indeed, Dick might almost have been said to have attained all that a person of his class could ever attain ; he might make a great deal more money, but he could not materially advance his position. Val was still, and perhaps more than ever, above him, since as they both progressed into manhood, their respective positions began to be more sharply defined : and nothing in the world could ever make it possible for Lord Eskside's heir to say to the young boat-builder, "Come up higher." And yet Val had lost all power of treating him as an inferior. It was a curious problem, infinitely more difficult, as was natural, to the generous young fellow on the higher level, than to the lowlier lad who made no pretensions to any sort of dignity, and never "stood upon" a quality which he did not suppose himself to possess.

There happened, however, a curious incident in Val's last summer at Oxford, which he indeed did not know, but which affected Dick strangely enough. One summer morning (it was in Commemoration week, when the mornings are somewhat languid) Dick's mother was seated in the little parlour facing the river, which her son had furnished with all the care of an untaught *virtuoso*. Half the things in it were of his own making ; but there were many trifles besides which he had "picked up," with that curious natural fancy for things pretty and unusual which was innate in him. It was a strange incongruous room. The floor was covered with a square of old Turkey carpet, the subdued harmonious colours of which, and soft mossy texture, were Dick's delight. The little table, covered with the old faded embroidered shawl, stood in the window ; an old-fashioned glass which Dick had "picked up" was on the mantelpiece, reflecting some china vases which his mother had bought, and which showed her taste to be of a different character from his. Prettily carved bookcases of his making were fitted into the corners ; and a common deal table, without any cover, stood just under one of them, with a large brown earthenware basin on it, before which his mother sat shelling peas for Dick's dinner. She had "a girl" now to help her with the work, and it was her son's desire that she should sit in the parlour. But as it was not within the poor soul's possibilities to shut herself up to needlework or any lady-like occupation, she brought in her peas to shell there, and sat alone, contented enough, yet oppressed with the sense that within a few days the same blank which she had before experienced would fall on the earth and skies. It was a bright morning, still cool but full of sunshine, which just touched the old-fashioned window-sill, upon which lay Dick's carving materials and a book or two—not, I am sorry to say, books intended to be read, but only to get designs out of, and suggestions for work. The river lay broad in the sunshine, relieved by here and there the bright green of some willows : the softened sounds outside, the soft silence within, were harmonious with the subdued sensations of the lonely woman, in whom all seemed stilled too for the moment. The shadow hung over her, but it had not yet fallen, and her mind was less excited than it had been —more able to endure, less intolerant of pain.

Thus she sat absorbed in her homely occupation, when

she heard voices approaching through the soft air. One of them she recognised at once with a thrill of pleasure to be Val's. He was coming slowly along, pointing out everything to some one with him. The woman dropped the peas out of her hands, and listened. The window was open, and so near the road that every sound was distinctly heard. It was some time before any one replied to Val, and the listener had leisure enough for many wild fears and throbs of anxious suspense. At last the answer came—in a lady's voice, which she knew as well as if she had heard it yesterday, with its soft Scotch accent, its firm tone and character, unlike any other she knew. The woman rose suddenly, noiselessly, to her feet; she grew white and blanched, as with deadly terror.

"Here is where Brown lives," said Val, in his cheery voice—"and his mother, whom I want you particularly to see. A nice little house, isn't it? Stop and look at the boats down the river before we go in. Isn't it pretty, grandma? not like our Esk, to be sure, but with a beauty of its own."

"Far gayer and brighter than Esk, certainly," said Lady Eskside, quite willing to humour the boy; though her own opinion of the broad, flat, unshadowed, and unfeatured Thames was not too flattering. She stood leaning upon his arm, rapt in a soft Elysium of pride and happiness. The lovely morning, and the good accounts she had been hearing of her boy, and the fact that he was going home with her, and that she was leaning on his arm, and seeing more beauty in his kind young face than the loveliest summer morning or the fairest scene could have shown her—all combined to make everything fair to Lady Eskside. She was going to visit his humble friends—to seal with her approbation that kindly patronage of the "deserving" poor, which is as creditable to their superiors as a love of low society is discreditable. They stood together talking for a minute at the open door.

At that same moment Dick was on his way to the back door which communicated with the boat-building yard—but was met, to his wonder and dismay, by his mother, flying from the house with a face blanched to deadly paleness, and a precipitate haste about her, which nothing but fear could have produced. She seized him by the arm without a word—indeed she was too breathless and panting to speak—and

dragged him with her, too much amazed to resist. "For God's sake, what is the matter, mother?" he said, when surprise would let him speak. She made no answer, but holding fast by him, took refuge in a boat-house built against the side wall of the little backyard through which she had flown. Dick, who was a patient fellow, not easily excited, stood by her wondering, but refraining to question when he saw the state of painful excitement in which she was. "Listen!" she said, under her breath; and presently he heard Val's voice in the yard calling her. "Mrs Brown!" cried Val; though it was the first time after her disavowal of it that he had used that name, which was now adopted by everybody else, as of course the name of Dick Brown's mother. "I can't think where she can have gone to," he added, with some vexation; "and I wanted you to see her specially—almost more than Brown himself."

"Well, my dear, it cannot be helped," said the voice of Lady Eskside, much more composed than Val's—for I cannot say that she was deeply disappointed. "No doubt the honest woman has run out about some needful business—leaving her peas, too. Come, Val, since you can't find her; your grandpapa will be waiting for us, my dear."

"I can't see Brown, either," he said, with still greater annoyance, coming back after an expedition into the yard. "The men say he went home. I can't tell you how annoyed I am."

"Well, well, I can see them another time, my dear," said my lady, smiling within herself at the boy's disappointment—"and we must be going to meet your grandfather. I wonder where she got that cover on her table. I had a shawl just like it once; but come, dear, come; think of my old lord waiting. We must not lose any more time, Val."

Dick put his arm round his mother; he thought she was going to faint, so deadly white was her face—white as the kerchief on her head. She laid her head on his shoulder, and moaned faintly. Her closed eyes, her blanched cheeks, her lips falling helplessly apart, gave Dick an impression of almost death.

"Mother, tell me, for God's sake, who is this, and what is the matter with you?" he cried.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“You must hold yourself ready to be called back at a moment’s notice, Val,” said the old lord. “It must be some time next year, and it may be any day. That is to say, we can scarcely have it, I suppose, before Parliament meets, except in some unforeseen case. Therefore see all you can as soon as you can, and after February hold yourself in readiness to be recalled any day.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Val, with a blithe assent which was trying to his grandfather. He was quite ready to do anything that was wanted of him—to make up his mind on any political subject on the shortest notice, and sign anything that was thought desirable ; but as for personal enthusiasm on the subject, or excitement in the possibility of being elected member for the county, I am afraid Val was as little moved as the terrier he was caressing. Perhaps, however, he was all the more qualified on that account to carry the traditional principles of the Rosses to the head of the poll, and to vote as his fathers had voted before him, when they had the chance,—or would have voted had they had the chance. Val was setting out on his travels when this warning was given. He was going to see his father in Florence, and, under his auspices, to visit Italy generally, which was a very pleasant prospect. Up to this time he had done the whole duty of boy in this world ; and now he had taken his degree, and had a right to the prouder title of man.

Not that Val was very much changed from his Eton days. He was still slim and slight, notwithstanding all his boating. His brown complexion was a trifle browner, if that were possible, with perpetual exposure to the sun ; his hair as full of curls, and as easily ruffled as ever, rising up like a crest from his bold brown forehead ; and I do not think he had yet got his temper under command, though its hasty flashes were always repented of the moment after. “A quick temper, not an ill temper,” Lady Eskside said ; and she made out that Valentine Ross, the tenth lord, her husband’s father—he whose portrait in the library her son called “a Raeburn,” and between whom and Val she had already attempted to establish a resemblance—was very hasty and hot-tempered too ; which was an infinite comfort to her, as

proving that Val got his temper in the legitimate way—"from his own family"—and not through that inferior channel, "his mother's blood." He was slightly excited about the visit to his father, and about his first progress alone into the great world—much more excited, I am sorry to say, than he was about representing the county; but on that point Lord Eskside did everything that was necessary, filling up what was wanting on Valentine's part in interest and emotion. He had again filled Rossraig with a party which made the woods ring with their guns all morning, and talked politics all night; and there was not a voter of importance in the whole county who had not already been "sounded," one way or other, as to how he meant to dispose of his vote. "The first thing to be done is to make sure of keeping the Radicals out," Lord Eskside said; for, indeed, a Whig lawyer was known to be poising on well-balanced wing, ready to sweep down upon a constituency which had always been stanch—faithful among the faithless known. The present Member, I must explain, was in weak health; and but for embarrassing his party, and thwarting the cherished purpose of Lord Eskside, who was one of the leading members of the Conservative party in the county, would have retired before now.

Val's term of residence at home was not, therefore, much more than a visit. He did what an active youth could do to renew all his old alliances, and climbed up the brae to the Hewan many times without seeing any of the family there, except the younger boys, who were mending of some youthful complaint under Mrs Moffatt's care, and who looked up to him with great awe, but were not otherwise interesting to the young man. "Are any of the others coming—is your mother coming—or Vi?" said Valentine; but these youthful individuals could afford him no information. "Oh ay, they're maybe coming next month," said old Jean, who took a feminine pleasure in the dismay that was visible in Valentine's face. "They were here a' the summer, June and July; and I wouldna wonder but we'll see them all October—if it's no too cauld," the old woman added, with a twinkle in her eye.

"What good will that do me?" said Val; and he leapt the dyke and went home through the ferns angry with disappointment. And yet he was not at all in love with Violet, he thought, but only liked her as the nicest girl

he knew. When he remarked to Lady Eskside that it was odd to find none of the Pringles at the Hewan, my lady arose and slew him on the spot. "Why should the Pringles be at the Hewan?" she said; "they have a place of their own, where it becomes them much better to be. To leave Violet there so long by herself last year was a scandal to her mother, and gave much occasion for talking."

"Why should it give occasion for talking?" said Val.

"A boy like you knows nothing about the matter," the old lady answered, putting a stop to him decisively. Perhaps that was true enough; but it was also true that Val took a long walk to the linn next day, and sat down under the beeches, and mused for half an hour or so, without quite knowing what he was thinking about. How clearly he remembered those two expeditions, mingling them a little in his recollection, yet seeing each so distinctly! the small Violet in her blue cloak, sleeping on his shoulder (which thought made him colour slightly and laugh in the silence, such intimate companionship being strangely impossible to think of nowadays), and the elder Violet, still so sweet and young, younger than himself, though he was the very impersonation of Youth, repeating all the earlier experiences except that one. "By Jove, how jolly Mary is!" said Valentine to himself at the end of this reverie; and when he went home he devoted himself to Miss Percival, who was again at RossCraig, as she always was when Lady Eskside was exposed to the strain and fatigue of company. "Do you remember our picnic at the linn last year?" he said, standing over Mary in a corner after dinner, to the great annoyance of an elderly admirer, who had meant to take this opportunity of making himself agreeable to a woman who seemed the very person to "make an excellent stepmother" to his seven children. Mary, who was conscious in some small degree of the worthy man's meaning, was grateful to Val for once; and enjoyed, as the quietest of women do, the discomfiture of her would-be suitor.

"Yes," she said, smiling; "what of it, you unruly boy?"

"I am not a proper subject for such epithets," said Val. "I have attained my majority, and made a speech to the tenantry. I say, Mary, do you know, that's a lovely spot, that linn. I was there to-day——"

“Oh, you were there to-day?”

“Yes, I was there. Is there anything wonderful in that?” said Val, not sure whether he ought not to take offence at the laughing tone, which seemed to imply something. “Tell Violet, when you see her, that it was uncommonly shabby of her not to come this year. We’d have gone again.”

“There’s a virtue in three times, Val,” said Mary. “If you go again, it will be more than a joke; and I don’t think I’ll give your message to Vi.”

“Why should it be more than a joke? Or why should it be a joke at all?” said Val, reddening, he scarcely knew why. He withdrew after this, slightly confused, feeling as if some chance touch had got at his heart, giving it a *dinnle* which was half pleasure and half pain. Do you know what a *dinnle* is, dear English reader? It means that curious sensation which you, in the poverty of your language, call “striking the funny bone.” You know what it is in the elbow. Valentine had that kind of sensation in his heart; and I think if this half-painful jar of the nerve lasted, and suggested quite new thoughts to the boy, it was all Mary Percival’s fault. I am happy to say that her widower got at her on Val’s withdrawal, and made himself most overpoweringly agreeable for the rest of the night.

And then the boy went away on his grand tour, leaving the old people at home rather lonely, longing after him; though Lord Eskside was too much occupied to take much notice of Val’s departure. My lady was very busy, too, paying visits all over the country, and paying court to great and small. She promised the widower her interest with Mary, but judiciously put him off till Miss Percival’s next visit, saying, cunningly, that she must have time to prepare her young friend for the idea, and trusting in Providence that the election might be over before an answer had to be given. It was gratifying to the Esksides to find a devoted canvasser for Valentine in the person of Lord Hightowers, the only possible competitor who could have “divided the party” in the county. Hightowers, however, was not fond of politics, and had no ambition for public life; it would have suited him better to be a locksmith, like Louis Seize. And among them all, they got the county into such a beautiful state of preparation that Lord Eskside could scarcely contain his rapture—and having laid all

his trains, and holding his match ready, sat down, in a state of excitement which it would be difficult to describe, to wait until the moment of explosion came.

In other places, too, Valentine's departure had caused far more excitement than he was at all aware of. He had seen and said good-bye to Dick with the most cordial kindness, on the day he left Oxford. But Val had not failed to remark a gravity and preoccupation about his humble friend which troubled him in no small degree. When he recounted to Dick the failure of Lady Eskside and himself on the day before, the young man had received the information with a painful attempt to seem surprised, which made Val think for a moment that Dick's mother had avoided the visit of set purpose. But as he knew of no hidden importance in this, the idea went lightly out of his head ; and a few days after he remembered it no more. Very much more serious had been the effect upon Dick. His mother's flight and her panic were equally unintelligible to him. The thought that there must be "something wrong" involved, in order to produce such terror, was almost irresistible ; and Dick's breeding, as I have said, had been of that practical kind which makes the mind accustomed to the commoner and vulgarer sorts of wrong-doing. He did not insist upon knowing what it was that made his mother afraid of Val's grandmother ; but her abject terror, and the way in which she dragged him too, out of sight, as if he had been a partner of her shame, had the most painful effect upon the young man. In the rudimentary state of morals which existed among the class from which he sprang, and where all his primitive ideas had been formed, dishonesty was the one crime short of murder which could bring such heavy shame along with it. He who steals is shunned in all classes, except among the narrow professional circles of thieves themselves ; and Dick could not banish from his thoughts a painful doubt and uncertainty about his mother's relations with "Mr Ross's people." She herself was so stunned and petrified by the great danger which she seemed to herself to have escaped, that she was very little capable of giving a rational explanation of her conduct. "You knew this lady before, mother ?" said Dick to her, half pitifully, half severely, as he took her back to the parlour and placed her in a chair after the visitors were gone. "Yes," she answered, but no more. And though he asked her many

other questions, nothing more than repeated Yes and No could he get in reply.

I do not know what wild sense of peril was in the poor creature's heart. She feared, perhaps, that they could have taken her up and punished her for running away from her husband ; she felt sure that they would separate her from her remaining boy—though had they not the other, whom she had given up to them ? and in her panic at the chance of being found out, all power of reasoning (if she ever had any) deserted her. Ah, she thought to herself, only a tramp is safe ! As soon as you have a settled habitation, and are known to neighbours, and can be identified by people about, all security leaves you : only on the tramp is a woman who wishes to hide herself safe. In her first panic, the thought of going away again, of deserting everything, of taking refuge on those open roads—those outdoor bivouacs which are full in the eye of day, yet better refuges than any mysterious darkness—came so strongly over her, that it was all she could do to withstand its force. But when she looked at her son, active and trim, in his boat-building yard, or saw him studying the little house at night, with his tools in his hand, to judge where he could put up something or improve something—his mother felt herself for the first (or perhaps it was the second) time in her life, bound as it were by a hundred minute threads which made it impossible for her to please herself. It was something like a new soul which had thus developed in her. In former times she had done as the spirit moved her, obeying her impulses whenever they were so strong as to carry everything else before them. Now she felt a distinct check to the wild force of these impulses. The blood in her veins moved as warmly as ever, impelling her to go, and she knew that she was free to go if she would, and that Dick too could be vanquished, and would come with her, however unwillingly. She was free to go, and yet she could not. For the first time in her life she had learned consciously to prefer another to herself. She could not ruin Dick. The struggle that she maintained with her old self was violent, but it was within herself, and was known to nobody ; and finally, the new woman, the higher creature, vanquished the old self-willed and self-regarding wanderer. She set herself to meet the winter with a dogged resolution, feeling less, perhaps, the absence of that visionary solace which she had found in the sight of Val, in consequence of

the hard and perpetual battle she had to fight with herself. And, to make it harder, she had not the cheery gratitude and tender appreciation of the struggle, which had rewarded her much less violent effort before. Dick was gloomy, overcast, pondering upon the strange thing that had happened. He could not get over it: it stood between him and his mother, making their intercourse constrained and unhappy. Had she *robbed* the old lady from whom she had fled in so strange a panic? Short of that, or something of that kind, why, poor Dick thought, should one woman be so desperately afraid of another? He did not, it is true, say, or even whisper to himself, this word so terrible to one in his insecure position, working his way in the world with slow and laborious advances; but the suspicion rankled in his heart.

All this time, however, his mother neither thought of setting herself right by telling him what her mystery was, nor once felt that she was wronging Dick by keeping the secret of his parentage so closely hidden from him. It did not occur to her that by doing this she was doing an injury to her boy. The life of gentlefolks—the luxurious and elegant existence into which her husband had tried to tame her, a wild creature of the woods—had been nothing but misery to her; and I doubt whether she was capable of realising that Dick, so different from herself in nature, would have felt differently in respect to those trammels from which she had fled. Had she been able to think, she would have seen how—unconsciously, with the instinct of another race than hers—the boy had been labouring all his life to manufacture for himself such a poor imitation of those trammels as was possible to him; but she was little capable of reasoning, and she did not see it. Besides, he was hers absolutely, and she had a right to him. She had given up the other, recognising a certain claim of natural justice on the part of the father of her children; and in so doing she had gone as far as nature could go, giving up half, with a rending of her heart which had never healed; but no principle of which she had ever heard called upon her to give up the whole. The very fact of having made a sacrifice of one seemed to enhance and secure her possession of the other—and how could she do better for Dick than she had done for herself? But this question had not even arisen in her mind as yet. She feared that *they* had hidden emissaries, who, if they found her out,

might take her remaining child from her ; but that he was anyhow wronged by her silence, or had any personal rights in the matter, had not yet entered into her brooding, slowly working, confused, and inarticulate soul.

In one other house besides, Val and his concerns were productive of some little tumult of feeling—not the least important of the many eddies with which his stream of life was involved. Mr Pringle was almost as much excited about the approaching conflict as Lord Eskside. He saw in it opportunities for carrying out his own scheme, which he called exposure of fraud, but which to others much more resembled the vengeance of a disappointed man. He was the bosom friend of the eminent lawyer who meant to contest Eskside in the Liberal interest, and had no small share in influencing him to this step. His own acquaintance with the county, in the position of Lord Eskside's heir-presumptive in past days, had given him considerable advantages and much information which a stranger could not easily command ; and with silent vehemence he prepared himself for the conflict—contemplating one supreme stroke of revenge—or, as he preferred to think, contemplating a full exposure to the world of the infamous conspiracy against his rights and those of his children, from which the county also was now about to suffer. He did not speak freely to his family of these intentions, for neither his wife nor his children were in harmony with him on the subject ; but this fact, instead of inducing him to reconsider a matter which appeared to other eyes in so different a light, increased the violence of his feelings, just in proportion to the necessity he felt for concealing them. It was even an additional grievance against Valentine, and the old people who had set Valentine up as their certain successor, that the lad had secured the friendship of his enemy's own family. Sandy, who was by this time a hard-working young advocate, less fanciful and more certain of success than his father—though a very good son, and very respectful of his parents, had a way of changing the subject when the Eskside business was spoken of, which cut Mr Pringle to the quick. He could see that his son considered him a kind of monomaniac on this subject ; and indeed there was sometimes very serious talk between Sandy and his mother about this *idée fixe* which had taken hold upon the father's mind.

Thus Mr Pringle's own family set themselves against him ;

but perhaps there was not one of them that had the least idea what painful results might follow except poor little Violet, who was very fond of her father, and in whose childish heart Val had established himself long ago. She alone was certain that her father meant mischief—mischief of a deeper kind than mere opposition to his election, such as Mr Pringle, as tenant of the Hewan and the land belonging to it, had a right to make if he pleased. Violet watched him with a painful mixture of dread lest her father should take some unworthy step, and dread lest Valentine should be injured, contending in her mind. She could scarcely tell which would have been the most bitter to her; and that these two great and appalling dangers should be combined in one, was misery enough to fill her young soul with the heaviest shadows. This she had to keep to herself, which was still harder to bear, though very usual in the troubles of youth. Everything which concerns an unrevealed and nascent love,—its terrors, which turn the very soul pale; its partings, which press the life out of the heart; its sickness of suspense and waiting,—must not the maiden keep all these anguishes locked up in her heart, until the moment when they are over, and when full declaration and consent make an end at once of the mystery and the misery? This training most people go through, more or less; but the trial is so much harder upon the little blossoming woman that the dawnings of the inclination, which she has never been asked for, are a shame to her, which they are not to her lover. Violet did not venture to say a word even to her mother of her wish to be at the Hewan while Val was there—of her sick disappointment when she found he had gone away without a chance of saying good-bye; and though she did venture to whisper her fears lest papa might “say something to hurt poor Val’s feelings,” which was a very mild way of putting it—she got little comfort out of this suppressed confidence. “I am afraid he will,” Mrs Pringle said. “Indeed, the mere fact that your papa is Mr Seisin’s chief friend and right-hand man, will hurt Val’s feelings. I am very sorry, and I think it very injudicious; for why should we put ourselves in opposition to the Eskside family? but it cannot be helped, and your papa must take his way.”

“Perhaps if you were to speak to him,” said Vi, with youthful confidence in a process, than which she herself knew nothing more impressive, and even terrible on occasion.

“ Speak to him ! ” said Mrs Pringle ; “ if you had been married to him as long as I have, my dear, you would know how much good speaking to him does. Not that your papa is a bit worse than any other man.”

With this very unsatisfactory conclusion poor Violet had to be satisfied. But she watched her father as no one else did, fearing more than any one else. Her gentle little artifices, in which the child at first trusted much, of saying something pleasant of Val when she had an opportunity—vaunting his fondness for the boys, his care of herself (in any other case the strongest of recommendations to her father’s friendship), his respect for Mr Pringle’s opinions, his admiration of the Hewan—had, she soon perceived, to her sore disappointment, rather an aggravating than a soothing effect. “ For heaven’s sake, let me hear no more of that lad ! I am getting to hate the very sound of his name,” her father said ; and poor Violet would stop short, with tears springing to her eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV.

VALENTINE went off gaily upon his journey, without any thought of the tragic elements he had left behind him. I think, had Dick been still at the rafts at Eton, his young patron would have proposed to him to accompany him to Italy in that curious relationship which exists in the novel and drama, and could perhaps exist in former generations, but not now, among men—as romantic humble servant and companion. But Dick was grown too important a man to make any such proposal possible. Valentine dallied a little in Paris, which he saw for the first time, and made his way in leisurely manner across France, and along the beautiful Cornice road, as people used to do in the days before railways were at all general, or the Mont Cenis tunnel had been thought of. He met, I need not add, friends at every corner—old “ Eton fellows,” comrades from Oxford, crowds of acquaintances of his own class and kind—a peculiarity of the present age which is often very pleasant for the traveller, but altogether destroys the strangeness, the novelty, the

characteristic charm, of a journey through a foreign country. A solid piece of England moving about over the Southern landscape could not be more alien to the soil on which it found itself than were those English caravans in which the young men travelled ; talking of cricket if they were given that way—of hits to leg, and so many runs off one bat ; or, if they were boating men, of the last race, or what happened at Putney or at Henley, while the loveliest scenes in the world flew past their carriage-windows like a panorama. I think Mr Evelyn saw a great deal more of foreign countries when he made the grand tour ; and even Val, though he was not very learned in the jargon of the picturesque, got tired of those endless *réchauffés* of stale games and pleasures. He got to Florence about a fortnight after he left England, and made his way at once to the steep old Tuscan palace, with deeply-corniced roof and monotonous gloom of aspect, which stood in one of the smaller streets opening into the Via Maggio on the wrong side of the river. The wrong side—but yet the Pitti palace is there, and certain diplomatists preferred that regal neighbourhood. Val found a servant, a bland and splendid Italian major-domo, waiting for him when he arrived, but not his father, as he had half hoped ; and even when they reached the great gloomy house, he was received by servants only—rather a dismal welcome to the English youth. They led him through an endless suite of rooms, half lighted, softly carpeted, full of beautiful things which he remarked vaguely in passing, to an inner sanctuary, where his father lay upon a sofa with a luxurious writing-table by his side. Richard Ross sprang up when he heard his son announced, and came forward holding out his hand. He even touched Valentine's face with his own, first one cheek, then the other,—a salutation which embarrassed Val beyond measure ; and then he bade him welcome in set but not unkindly terms, and began to ask him about his journey, and how he had left “everybody at home.”

This was only the third time that Val had seen his father, and Richard was now a man approaching fifty, and considerably changed from the elegant young diplomatist, who had surveyed with so little favour fourteen years ago the boy brought back to him out of the unknown. Richard's first sensation now on seeing his son was one of quick repugnance. He was so like—the vagrant woman against whom Mr Ross was bitter as having destroyed his life. But he was too wise

to allow any such feeling to show, and indeed did his best to make the boy at home and comfortable. He asked him about his studies, and received Val's half-mournful confession of not having perhaps worked so well as he might have done, with an indulgent smile. "It was not much to be expected," he said; "boys like you, with no particular motive for work, seldom do exert themselves. But I heard you had gained reputation in a still more popular way," he added; and spoke of the boat-race, &c., in a way that made Val deeply ashamed of that triumph, though up to this moment he had been disposed to think it the crowning triumph of his life. "You were quite right to go in for it, if your inclination lies that way," said his bland father. "It is as good a way as another of getting a start in society." And he gave Val a list of "who" was in Florence, according to the usage established on such occasions. He even took the trouble of going himself to show him his room, which was a magnificent chamber, with frescoed walls and gilded ceilings, grand enough for a prince's reception-room, Val thought; and told him the hours of meals, and the arrangements of the household generally. "My house is entirely an Italian one," he said, "but two or three of the people speak French. I hope you know enough of that language at least, to get on easily. Your own servant, of course, will be totally helpless, but I will speak to Domenico to look after him. If you know anything at all of Italian, you should speak it," he added, suavely; "you will find it the greatest help to you in your reading hereafter. Now I will leave you to rest after your long journey, and we shall meet at dinner," said the politest of fathers. Val sat staring before him half stupefied when he found himself left alone in the beautiful room. This was not the kind of way in which a son just arrived would be treated at Eskside. How much he always had to explain to his grandmother, to tell her of, to hear about! What a breathless happy day the first day at home always was, so full of talk, news, consultations, interchange of the family nothings that are nothing, yet so sweet! Val's journey had only been from Leghorn, no further, so he was not in the least fatigued; and why he should be shut up here in his room to rest he had not a notion, any desire to rest being far from his thoughts. After a while he got up and examined the room, which was full of handsome old furniture. How he wished Dick had been with him,

who would have enjoyed all those cabinets, and followed every line of the carvings with interest! Valentine himself cared little for such splendours. And finally he went out, and found as usual a school-fellow round the first corner, and marched about the strange beautiful place till it was time for dinner, and felt himself again.

It was very strange, however, to English—or rather Scotch—Valentine, to find himself in this Italian house, with a man so polished, so cultivated, so exotic as his father for his sole companion. Not that they saw very much of each other. They met at the twelve o'clock breakfast, where every dish was new to Val, for the *ménage* was thoroughly Italian; and at dinner on the days when Richard dined at home. Sometimes he took his handsome boy with him to great Italian houses, where, in the flutter of rapid conversation which he could not follow, poor Val found himself hopelessly left out, and looked as *gauche* and unhappy as any traditional lout of his age; and sometimes Val himself would join an English party at a hotel, where the hits to leg and the Ladies' Challenge Cup would again be the chief subjects of conversation; if not (which was still more dreary) the ladies' eager comparing of notes over Lady Southsea's garden party, or that charming Lady Mary Northwood's afternoon teas. On the whole, Val felt that his father's banquets were best adapted to the locality; and when a lovely princess, with jewels as old as her name and as bright as her eyes, condescended to put up with his indifferent French, the young man was considerably elated, and proud of his father and his father's society—as, when the same fair lady congratulated Richard upon the *beaux yeux* of Monsieur *son fils*, his father was of him.

One of the rare evenings which they spent together, Val informed his father of Lord Eskside's eager preparations for the ensuing election, and of the place he was himself destined to take in the eyes of his county and country. Richard Ross did not receive this information as his son expected. His face grew immediately overcast.

“I wonder my father is so obstinate about this,” he said. “He knows my feeling on the subject. It is the most terrible ordeal a man can be subjected to. I wish you had let me know, all of you, before making up your minds to this very foolish proceeding. Parliament!—what should you want with Parliament at your age?”

"Not much," said Val, somewhat uneasy to hear his grandfather attacked by his father, and a little dubious whether it became him to take the old man's side so warmly as he wished; but I hope I shall do my duty as well as another," he said, with a little modest pride, "though I have still everything to learn."

"Do your duty! stuff and nonsense," said Richard; "what does a boy of your age know about duty? Please your grandfather you mean."

Val felt the warm blood mounting to his face, and bit his lip to keep himself down. "And if it was so, sir," he said, his eyes blazing in spite of himself, "there might be worse things to do."

Richard stopped short suddenly and looked at him—not at his face, but into his eyes, which is of all things in the world the most trying to a person of hot temper. "Ha!" he said, with a soft smile, raising his eyebrows a little in gentle surprise, "you have a temper, I see! how is it I never found that out before?"

Val dug his heels into the rich old Turkey carpet; he pressed his nails into his flesh, wounding himself to keep himself still. One glance he gave at the perfect calm of his father's face, then cast down his eyes that he might not see it. Richard looked at him with amused calculation, as if measuring his forces, then waited, evidently expecting an outburst. When none came, he said with that precise and nicely-modulated voice, every tone of which ministers occasions of madness to the impatient mind—

"Of course, with that face you must have a temper; I should have seen it at the first glance. But you have learnt to restrain it, I perceive. I congratulate you—it augurs well for your success in life."

Then he fell back quite naturally into the previous subject, changing his tone in a moment to one of polite and perfect ease.

"I am sorry, as I said before, that my father is so obstinate. Why doesn't he put in some squire or other whom he might influence as much as he pleases? But you; I tell you there isn't such an ordeal in existence. Everything a man has ever done is raked up."

"They may rake up as much as they please," said Val, with a violent effort, determined not to be outdone by his father in power of self-control. His voice, however, was

unsteady, and so was the laugh which he forced. "They may rake up what they please; I don't think they can make much of that, so far as I am concerned."

"So far as you are concerned!" repeated Richard, impatiently. "Why, if your grandaunt made a *faux pas* a hundred years ago, it would be brought up against you. You! It was not robbing of orchards I was thinking of. My father is very foolish; and it is wilful folly, for I told him my sentiments on the subject."

"I wish, sir, if it was the same to you, you would remember that my grandfather—is my grandfather," said Val, not raising his eyes.

"Oh, very well. He is not my grandfather, you see, and that makes me, perhaps, less respectful," said Richard. "You have taken away my comfort with this news of yours, and it is hard if I may not abuse somebody. Do you know what an election is? If your great-grandmother, as I said, ever made a *faux pas*—"

"I don't suppose she did," said Val. "Why should we be troubled about the reputation of people who live only in the picture-gallery? I am not afraid of my grandaunt."

"It is because you do not know," said Richard, with a sigh. "Write to your grandfather, and persuade him to give it up. It is infinitely annoying to me. Tell him so. I shall not have a peaceful moment till it is over. One's whole history and antecedents delivered up to the gossip of a vulgar crowd! I think my father must have taken leave of his wits."

And he began to pace about the great dimly-lighted room in evident perturbation. The rooms in the Palazzo Graziani were all dimly lighted. A few softly burning lamps, shaded with delicate *abatjoures*, gave here and there a silvery glimmer in the midst of the richly-coloured and balmy darkness—just enough to let you see here a picture, there a bit of tapestry, an exquisite cabinet, or some priceless "bit" of the sumptuous furniture which belongs of right to such houses. Richard's slight figure moving up and down in this lordly place, with impatient movements, disturbed its calm like a pale ghost of passions past.

"Every particular of one's life!" he continued. "I told him so. It is all very well for men who have never stirred from home. If you want to save us all a great deal of annoyance, and yourself a great many stings and wounds,

write to your grandfather, and beseech him to give it up."

"I will tell him that you wish it, sir," said Val, hesitating; "but I cannot say that I do myself, or that I distrust his judgment. Will you tell me what wounds I have to fear should they bring up all my antecedents—every particular of one's life?"

Richard eyed his son from the shade in which he stood. Val's face was in the full light. It was pale, with a certain set of determination about the mouth, on which there hov-ered a somewhat forced smile. He paused a moment, won-dering how to reply. A dim room is an admirable field for deliberation, with one face in the shade and the other in the light. Should he settle the subject with a high hand, and put the young man summarily down? Should he yield? He did neither. He altered his voice again with the consummate skill of a man trained to rule and make use of even his self-betrayals, and knowing every possible way of doing so. He laughed softly as he came back to the table, throwing off his impatience as if it had been a cloak.

"A snare! a snare!" he said. "If you think I am so innocent as to fall into it, or if you hope to see me draw a chair to the table and begin, 'My son, listen to the story of my life,' you are mistaken, Val. I am like most other men. I have done things, and known people whom I should not care to have talked about—and which will be talked about inevitably if you are set up as a candidate for Eskside. Never mind! I shall have to put up with it, I suppose, since my father has set his heart upon it; but I warn you that it may come harder on you than me; and when I say so I have done. Give me your photographs, and let me look over them—a crowd of your Eton and Oxford friends, I suppose."

Val looked at his father with a question in his eyes, which he tried to put with his lips, and could not. During all these years he had thought little enough of his mother. Now and then the recollection that there was such a person wandering somewhere in the world would come to him at the most unlikely time—in the middle of the night, in the midst of some moment of excitement, rarely when he could make any inquiries about her, even had it been possible for him to utter such inquiries. Now at once these suppressed recollections rushed into his mind. Here was the fountain-head of infor-

mation ; and no doubt the story which he did not know, which no one had ever told him, was what his father feared. "Father," he began, his mouth growing dry with excitement, his heart beating so loudly that he could scarcely hear himself speak.

Probably Richard divined what he was going to say—for Val, I suppose, had hardly ever addressed him solemnly by this title before. He called him "Sir," when he spoke to him, scarcely anything else. Richard stopped him with a rapid movement of his hand.

"Don't, for heaven's sake, speak to me so solemnly," he said, half fretfully, half playfully. "Let me look at your photographs. There is a good man here, by the way, where you should go and get yourself done. The old people at home would like it, and it might prove a foundation, who knows, for the fine steel engraving of the member for Esk-side, which no doubt will be published some day or other. Come round to this side and tell me who they are."

The words were stopped on Valentine's lips ; and if any one could have known how bitter these words were to him, his relinquishment of the subject would be more comprehensible to them. Are we not all glad to postpone a disagreeable explanation ? "It must be done some time," we say ; "but why now, when we are tolerably comfortable ?" Valentine acted upon this natural feeling. His sentiments towards his father were of a very mingled character. He was proud of him ; his refinement and knowledge of the world made a powerful impression upon the boy's mind ; Val even admired the man who was so completely unlike himself—admired him and almost disliked him, and watched him with mingled wonder and respect. He had never had a chance of regarding him with the natural feelings of a child or forming the usual prejudices on his behalf. He met him almost as one stranger meets another, and could not but judge him accordingly on his merits rather than receive him blindly, taking those merits for granted, which is in most cases the more fortunate lot of a son. His father was only a relation of whom he knew very little, and with whom he was upon quite distant and independent, yet respectful terms. They were both glad, I think, to take refuge in the photographs ; and Richard asked with a very good grace, "Who is this ?" and "Who is that ?"—through showers of young Oxford men and younger Etonians. When he had

made his way through them, there was still a little pack of cards to be turned over—photographs not dignified enough to find a place in any book. Hunter, the gamekeeper, Harding, the butler, his wife the housekeeper, and many other humble personages, were amongst them ; and Richard turned them over with more amusement than the-others had given him. Suddenly, however, his remarks came to a dead stop. Val, who was standing close by him, felt that his father started and moved uneasily in his chair. He said nothing for the moment ; then in a voice curiously unlike his former easy tone, yet curiously conquered into a resemblance of it, he said, with a little catching of his breath, “And who is this, Val ?”

It was a scrap of an unmounted photograph, a bit cut off from the corner of a river scene—a portrait taken unawares and unintentionally by a wandering artist who was making studies of the river. It was Dick Brown’s mother, as she had been used to stand every day within her garden wall, looking at Val’s boat as it passed. Val had seen the picture with her figure in it, and had bought and kept it as a memento of two people in whom he took so much interest : for by an odd chance Dick was in it too, stooping to push off a boat from the little pier close by, and very recognisable by those who knew him, though his face was scarcely visible. “Oh, sir,” said Val, instinctively putting out his hand for it, “that is nothing. It was taken by chance. It’s the portrait of a woman at Oxford, the mother of a fellow I know.”

“A fellow you know—who may that be ? is his portrait among those I have been looking at ? This,” said Richard, holding it fast and disregarding Val’s hand, which was stretched out to take it, “is an interesting face.”

What feelings were in the man’s breast as he looked at it who can tell ? Surprise, almost delirious, though he hid it as he had trained himself to hide everything ; quick-springing curiosity, almost hatred, wild eagerness to know what his son knew of her. He made that remark about the interesting face not unfeelingly, but unawares, to fill up the silence, because everything in him was stirred up into such wild impulses of emotion. The light swam in his eyes ; yet he continued to see the strange little picture thus blown into his hand as it seemed by some caprice of fate. As for Valentine, he felt a repugnance incomprehensible to himself to say anything about Dick or his mother, and could have

snatched the scrap of photograph out of his father's hand, though he could not tell why.

"Oh, it is not much," he said—"it is not any one you would know. It is the mother of a lad I took a great fancy to a few years ago. He was on the rafts at Eton, and used to do all sorts of things for me. That's his mother—and indeed there's himself in the corner, if you could see him. I found it in a photograph of the river; and as I knew the people, and it is so seldom one sees people who are unconscious of their likenesses being taken, I bought it; but of course it has no interest to any one who does not know the originals," and he put out his hand for it again.

"Pardon," said Mr Ross, serenely—"it has an interest. The face is a very remarkable face, like one I remember seeing years ago. What sort of a person was her son?"

By skilful questions he drew from Val all that he knew: the whole story of Dick's struggle upwards; of his determination to do well; of the way he had risen in the world. Val mixed himself as little as he could with the narrative, but could not help showing unwittingly how much share he had in it; and at last grew voluble on the subject, flattered by the interest his father took in it. "You say the son was at the rafts at Eton, and yet this picture was taken at Oxford. How was that?" said Richard. Val was standing behind him all this time, and their looks had not met.

"Well, sir," said Val, "I hope you won't think, as Grinder did, that it was my love of what he called low society. If Brown is low society, I should like to know where to find better."

"So Grinder said it was your love of low society?"

"He wrote to my grandfather," said Val, sore at the recollection, "but fortunately they knew me better; and when I explained everything, grandmamma, like the old darling she is, sent me ten pounds to buy Brown a present. I got him some books, and crayons, and carving things—"

"Yes; but you have not told me how this came to be taken at Oxford," said Richard, persistent.

"Well, sir, I was going to tell you. I heard that old Styles wanted a man. Styles, perhaps you recollect him down at— Yes, that's him. So I told him I could recommend Brown, and so could Lichen, who had been captain of the boats in my time. Lichen of Christ's-Church. You won't know his name? He rowed stroke—"

"Yes, yes ; but let us come back to Brown."

"There is not much more," said Val, a little disconcerted. "Styles took him on our recommendation, and hearing what an excellent character he had—and that's where he is now. He and his mother have got Styles' little house, and the old man's gone into the country. I shouldn't wonder if Brown had the business when he dies. He has got on like a house on fire," said Val—"educated himself up from nothing, and would be a credit to any one. I've always thought," said the lad, with an innocent assumption of superior insight, "that he cannot have been born a cad, as he seemed, when I first saw him ; for the mother looks as if she had been a lady. You laugh, sir, but I dare swear it's true."

"I was not laughing," said Richard, bundling up the photographs together, and handing them over to his son ; "indeed, I think you have behaved very creditably, and shown yourself capable of more than I thought. Now, my dear fellow, I'm going to work to-night. Take your pictures. They have amused me very much ; and I think you should go to bed."

Val had been doing a great deal that day, and I think he was not sorry to take his father's advice. He gathered all his treasures together, and bade him a more cordial good-night than usual, as he went away with his candle through the dim suite of rooms. As soon as he had turned his back, Richard Ross pushed away the papers he had drawn before him, and watched the young figure with its light, walking down the long vista of curtained rooms. The man was not genial enough to let that same gentle apparition come in and illuminate with love the equally dim and lonely antechambers of his heart ; but some thrill of natural feeling quickened within him, some strange movement of unwonted emotion as he looked after the lad, and felt how wonderful was this story, and how unwittingly, in natural friendliness of his boyish soul, Val had done a brother's part to his brother. The idea moved him more than the reality did. He took up the little photograph again, which he had kept without Valentine's knowledge, and gazed at it, but not with love. "Curse of my life!"—he said to himself, murmuring the words in sonorous Tuscan, which he spoke like a native ; and clenching his teeth as he gazed at the image of the woman who had ruined him, as he thought. She to look

"as if she had been a lady!"—he laughed within himself secretly and bitterly at the thought—a lady! the tramp-girl who had been his curse, and whom he had never been able to teach anything to. When the first vehemence of these feelings was over, he sat down and wrote a long letter to his confidential solicitor in London, a man to whom the whole story had long been known. And I do not think Richard Ross had sound sleep that night. The discovery excited him deeply, but not with any of the pleasure with which a man finds what he has lost, with which a husband might be supposed to discover the traces of his lost wife and child. No; he wanted no tamed tramp to disgrace him with her presence, no successful mechanic-son to shame his family: as they had chosen, so let them remain. He had not even any curiosity, but a kind of instinctive repugnance to his other son. And yet he was pleased with Valentine, and thought of the boy more kindly, because he had been kind to his lost brother. How this paradox should be, I am unable to explain.

CHAPTER XXV.

"So Mr Pringle is on the other side," said Mary Percival. "Perhaps it is just as well, considering all things."

"Why should it be just as well?" said Violet, with a spark of fire lighting up her soft eyes. "Is unkindness, and opposition among people who ought to be friends, ever 'just as well'? You are not like yourself when you say so;" and a colour which was almost angry rose upon Vi's delicate cheek.

"My dear, I have never concealed from you that I want to keep you and Val apart from each other," said Miss Percival, with an injudicious frankness which I have never been able to understand in so sensible a woman; but the most sensible persons are often foolish on one special point, and this was Mary's particular weakness.

"Why should we be kept apart?" said Violet, with lofty youthful indignation. "Nobody can keep us apart—neither papa's politics nor anything else outside of ourselves."

"Vi! Vi! I don't think that is how a girl should speak of a young man."

"Oh, I cannot bear you when you go on about girls and young men!" cried Violet, stamping her small foot in the vehemence of her indignation. "Is it my fault that I am a girl and Val a boy? Must I not be friends with him because of that, a thing we neither of us can help, though I have known him all my life? But we are fast friends," cried Vi, with magnificent loftiness, her pretty nostrils dilating, her bright eyes flashing upon her companion. "Neither of us thinks for a moment of any such nonsense. We were friends when we were seven years old, and I would not give up my friend, not if he were twenty young men!"

"You are a foolish little girl, and I am sorry for you, Vi," said Mary, shaking her head. "At any rate, because you are fond of Val, that is no reason for being uncivil to me."

At these words, as was natural, Violet, with tears in her eyes, flew to her friend and kissed her, and begged pardon with abject penitence. "But I wish I had nothing more on my mind than being friends with Val," the girl said, sighing, "or the difference of people's politics. Of course people must differ in politics, as they do in everything else. I am a Liberal myself. I think that to resist everything that is new, and cling to everything that is old, whether they are bad, or whether they are good, is very wrong. To choose what is best, whether old or new, is surely the right way."

"Oh, you are a Liberal yourself?" said Mary, amused; "but I don't doubt Val could easily turn you into a Conservative, Vi."

"Val could not do anything of the kind," said Violet, with some solemnity. "Of course I can't have lived to be twenty without thinking on such subjects. But I wish I had nothing more on my mind than that. Both Liberals and Conservatives may be fond of their country, and do their best for it. I don't like a man less for being a Tory, though I am a Liberal myself."

"That is very satisfactory for us Tories, my dear," said Mary, "and I am obliged to you for your magnanimity; but what is it then, my pretty Vi, that you have upon your mind?"

The girl paused and let fall a few sudden tears. "Mary," she said (for there was a Scotch tie of kinship between them also which made this familiarity admissible), "I am so

frightened—and I don't know what I am frightened at. I feel sure papa means to do something more than any one knows of, against Val."

"Against Val! He means to oppose his election, no doubt, and give Lord Eskside and our side all the trouble possible: we know that," cried Mary, who was a politician of the old school. "These are always the tactics of the party—to give as much trouble, and sow as many heart-burnings as possible; though they know they have not a chance of success."

"I suppose it is just what the Tories would do if they were in the same position," said Violet, naturally on the defensive. "But all that is nothing to me," she cried; "if people like to fight, let them: I don't mind it myself—the excitement is pleasant. But, of course, you know better than I do—are you sure there is nothing more than fair fighting that papa could do to Val?"

"I am sure your papa is not a man to do anything inconsistent with fair fighting," said Mary, evasively, her curiosity strongly roused.

This stopped Violet once more. She gave a heavy sigh. "I hear them say that everything is fair in an election contest, as everything is fair in war."

"Or love."

"I don't understand such an opinion," said Violet, rising to her feet and striking her pretty hands together in impatience. "If a thing is wrong once, it is wrong always Love! they call that love which can be pushed on by tricks and lies; and people like you, Mary—people who ought to know better—say so too. Of course, one knows you cannot *think* it," the girl cried, with a quick-drawn breath, half sob, half sigh.

"Well, dear, I suppose we all give in to the saying of things which we don't think," said Miss Percival, deprecatingly; "but, Vi, you have made me curious. What is it your father means to do?"

"I wanted to ask *you* that; what can he do? Can he do anything?" said Violet. Mary looked at the impulsive girl, not knowing what to answer. Vi was true as truth itself in her generous young indignation against all unworthy strategy—and she was "fond of" and "friends with" Val, according to the childish phraseology which, in this respect at least, she chose to retain. But still, even Violet's inno-

cence was a reason for not trusting her with any admission that Valentine was open to special attack. She might assail her father with injudicious partisanship, entreating him to withhold from assaults which he had never thought of making ; so that, on the whole, Mary judged it was judicious to say nothing as to any special flaw in the young candidate's armour. She shook her head.

"I cannot think of anything that could be done against Valentine," she said. "He has been a good boy, so far as we know ; and when a boy is not a good boy it is always found out. Sir John is to propose him, and Mr Lynton of the Linn to second,—he could not have a better start ; and dear old Lord Eskside to stand by him, to get his heart's desire," said Mary, with a little glimmer of moisture in her eyes. "You young things don't think of the old people. It goes to my heart, after all their disappointments, to think they will have their wish at last."

Violet did not make any reply. Though she was a Liberal herself, and looked upon politics generally from such an impartial elevation of good sense, it was no small trouble to poor Vi to know that she could not even pretend to be on Valentine's side at this great crisis of his life ;—could not go with Lady Eskside's triumphant party to see him done honour to in the sight of all men ; could not even wear a bit of ribbon, poor child, for his sake, but must put on the colours of snuffy Mr Seisin, and go with her mother to the opposition window, and pretend to look delighted at all the jokes that might be made, and all the assaults upon her friends. Violet would not allow how deeply she felt this, the merely superficial and necessary part of the situation ; and, in reality, it was as nothing to her in comparison with the dread in her heart of something more, she knew not what—some masked battery which her father's hand was arranging. She took Mary out to show her the improvements which were being made at the Hewan, the new rooms which were almost finished, and which would make of the poor little cottage a rustic villa. Jean Moffatt, whose nest had not been interfered with, though Mr Pringle had bought the place, came out as she heard the voices of the ladies, to take her share in the talk. Jean had now the privileged position of an old servant among the Pringles, and still acted as duenna and protectress to Violet on many a summer day when that little maiden escaped alone

with her maid from Moray Place. Mr Pringle had been getting on in his profession during those years; not in its honours, the tide of which he had allowed to go past him, but in its more substantial rewards. He was better off, and able to afford himself the indulgence of a whim; so the Hewan had been bought, half in love, half in hatred. In love, because the children, and Violet especially, were fond of the little place; and in hatred, because it commanded the always coveted domain of Eskside.

"You are a Liberal too, I understand, Jean," said Mary; "you are all Mr Ross's enemies up here."

"I wish he might never have waur enemies," said old Jean, "and that's no an ill wish; but I'll never disown my principles. I've aye been a Leeberal from the time of the Reform Bill, which made an awfu' noise in the country. There's nane o' your contests worth speaking o' in comparison with that. But I'm real distressed that there's this opposition now. We'll no get our man in, and we'll make a great deal o' dispeace; and two folk so muckle thought of in the county as my lord and my lady might have gotten their way for once. I canna bide the notion of going again' Mr Valentine; but he's a kindly lad, and will see that, whatever you are, ye maun gang with your paerty. Lord bless the callant! if it was for naething but yon chicken-pie, he's a hantle mair to me than ony Edinburgh advocate that was ever born. But you see yoursel, Miss Percival, how we're placed; we maun side with our ain paerty, right or wrong."

"Yes, I see the difficulty of the position," said Mary, laughing, "and I shall make a point of explaining it to Val."

"Do that, mem," said Jean, seriously. She did not see any joke in the matter, any more than Vi did, whose mind was in a very disturbed state.

"And I suppose your son will be of your mind?" said Mary, not indisposed to a little gentle canvassing on her own part.

"I couldna undertake to answer for John," said the old woman; "nor I wouldna tamper with him," she added, "for it's a great responsibility, and he ought to judge for himself. There's one thing with men, they tak a bias easy, and John was never a Leeberal on conviction, as ye may say, like his faither and me; and he has a' the cobbling from the House, and a' the servants' work, and my lord's

shooting-boots, and so forth, and noo and then something to do for my lady hersel ; so I wouldna say but he might have a bias. It's a grand thing to have nae vote," said Jean, meditatively, " and then ye can have the satisfaction of keeping to your party without harming your friends on the other side."

Jean expressed thus the sentiments of a great many people in Eskside on the occasion of this election. Even some of the great tenant-farmers who were Liberals, instead of delighting in the contest, as perhaps they ought to have done, grumbled at the choice set before them, and regretted the necessity of vexing the Eskside family, old neighbours, by keeping to their own party. For Val Ross, as they all felt, was on the whole a much more appropriate representative than " a snuffy old Edinburgh lawyer," said one of the malcontents, " with about as much knowledge of the county as I have of the Parliament House." " But he knows how to bring you into the Parliament House, and squeeze the siller out of your pouch and mine," said another. The Parliament House in question, gentle Southern reader, meant not the House of Commons, but the Westminster Hall of Edinburgh, into which, or its purlieus, it was quite easy to get with Mr Seisin's help, but not so easy to get out again. I am afraid, indeed, that as the Liberal party was weak in the county, and there had been no contest for some time, and no active party organisation existed, there would have been no attempt to oppose Valentine at all but for the determination of Mr Pringle, who, without bringing himself very prominently forward, had kept his party sharply up to the mark, and insisted upon their action. That they had no chance of success, or so little that it was not worth calculating upon, they all acknowledged ; but allowed themselves to be pushed on, notwithstanding, by the ardour of one fierce personal animosity, undisclosed and unsuspected. Mr Pringle had been gradually winding himself up to this act of vengeance through many years. I think if other people had recollected the strange way in which his young supplanter had made his first appearance at Eskside, or if any sort of stigma had remained upon Val, the feelings of the heir-presumptive would have been less exaggerated ; but to find that everybody had forgotten these suspicious circumstances — that even his insinuations as to the lad's love of low company, though sufficiently relished for the moment, had pro-

duced no permanent impression—and that the world in general accepted Valentine with cheerful satisfaction as Richard Ross's son and Lord Eskside's heir, without a doubt or question on the subject,—all this exasperated Mr Pringle beyond bearing. No passionate resentment and sense of injury like this can remain and rankle so long in a mind without somehow obscuring the moral perceptions ; and the man had become so possessed by this consciousness of a wrong to set right and an injury to avenge, that it got the better both of natural feeling and morality. He did not even feel that the thing he meditated was beyond the range of ordinary electioneering attack ; that it strained every law even of warfare, and exceeded the revenges permitted to civilised and political men. All this he would have seen in a moment had the case not been his own. He would have condemned any other man without hesitation ; would have solemnly pointed out to him the deliberate cruelty of the project, and the impossibility of throwing any gloss, even of pretended justice, over it. For no virtuous impulse to punish a criminal, no philanthropic purpose of hindering the accomplishment of a crime, could be alleged for what he meant to do. The parties assailed were guiltless, and there was no chance that his assault, however virulent, could shake poor Val's real position, however much it might impair his comfort. He could scarcely, even to himself, allege any reason except revenge.

Meanwhile Val had been summoned home. He had spent Christmas with his father, and since then had travelled farther afield, visiting, though with perhaps not much more profit than attended his tour in Italy, the classic islands of Greece. It was early spring when the summons reached him to return without delay, everything in the political horizon being ominous of change. Val got back in March, when the whole country was excited by the preliminaries of a general election. He had been so doubtful of the advantage of the abundant English society he had enjoyed abroad, that he was comforted to find himself in English society at home, where it was undeniably the right thing, and natural to the soil. When he arrived at Eskside there was a great gathering to meet him. His address was to be seen at full length on every bit of wall in Lasswade and the adjoining villages, and even in the outskirts of Edinburgh ; and the day of nomination was so nearly approaching that he had

scarcely time to shake himself free from the dust and fatigue of his journey, and to think of the speech which it would be necessary to deliver in answer to all the pretty compliments which no doubt would be showered upon him. Val, I am afraid, was a great deal more concerned about making a good appearance on this occasion, and conducting himself with proper manly coolness and composure—as if being nominated for a seat in Parliament was a thing which had already happened to him several times at least in his career—than about the real entry into public life itself, the responsibility of an honourable member, or any other legitimate subject of serious consideration. When he asked after everybody on his return, the dignified seriousness with which he was told of the presence of the Pringles at the Hewan did not affect the young man much. “Ah, you never liked poor Mr Pringle, grandma,” he said, lightly. “I have little occasion to like him,” said Lady Eskside; “and now that he is the getter up of all this opposition, the only real enemy you have, my own boy——”

“Oh, enemy! come, grandma, that is too strong,” said Val. “If I never have any worse enemy than old Pringle, I shall do. But I am sorry they are on the other side,” he added, with a boyish thought that his blue colours would have looked prettier than ever near Violet’s bright locks. He paused a moment, and then burst out with a laugh. “I wonder if they will put her into old Seisin’s yellow ribbons,” he cried, quite unaware how dreadfully he was betraying himself. “Poor Vi!”

Lady Eskside and Mary looked at each other—the one with a little triumph, the other with horror and dismay. It was my lady whose face expressed the latter sentiments. She had constantly refused to believe that Val had ever “thought twice” of Sandy Pringle’s daughter. Even now she assailed Mary indignantly, as soon as Valentine’s back was turned. “What did you mean by giving me such a look? Do you mean that a boy like that cannot think of a girl he has known all his life without being in love with her? My dear Mary, that is not like you. I was laughing myself, I confess,” said the old lady, who looked extremely unlike laughter, “at the idea of their yellow ribbons on Vi’s yellow hair. The little monkey! setting herself up, forsooth, as a Liberal; I’m glad the colours are unbecoming,” Lady Eskside concluded, with the poorest possible attempt at a laugh.

Mary made no reply—but she was much more prepossessed in favour of Val than she had ever been. Women like a man, or even a boy for that matter, who betrays himself—who has not so much command of his personal sentiments but that now and then a stray gleam of them breaking forth shows whereabouts he is. Mary—who had taken Violet under her protection, determined that not if she could help it should that little girl fall a victim, as she herself had done—was entirely disarmed by the boyish ingenuousness of his self-disclosure. She thought with a half sigh, half smile, once more, as she had thought that summer day by the linn, that this boy might have been her son had things gone as they should—that he ought indeed to have been her son. Sometimes this was an exasperating, sometimes a softening thought; but it came to Mary on this occasion in the mollifying way.

“Don’t ask me anything about Vi,” she said to Valentine the same evening. “You know I never approved of too much friendship between you; she is your enemy’s daughter.”

“What do you call too much friendship?” said Val, indignantly. “If you think I am going to give her up because her old father is an old fool, and goes against us, you are very much mistaken. Why, Vi! I have known her since I was *that* high—better than Sandy or any of them.”

“Her father is not so dreadfully old,” said Mary, laughing; “and besides, Val, I don’t put any faith in him; his opposition is a great deal more serious than you think.”

“Well, I suppose he must stick to his party,” said Val, employing in the lightness of his heart old Jean’s words; “but I know very well,” he added, with youthful confidence, “that though he may be forced for the sake of his party to show himself against me, he wishes me well in his heart.”

“You are convinced of that?”

“Quite convinced,” said Val, with magnificent calm. Indeed I rather think the boy was of opinion that this was the case in the world generally, and that however outward circumstances might compel an individual here and there to appear to oppose him, by way of keeping up his party or otherwise, yet in their hearts the whole human race wished him well.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IT was on a bright spring morning that the nomination of a knight of the shire to represent Eskshire in Parliament took place in Castleton, the quiet little country town which was not far from the Duke's chief seat, and tolerably central for all the county. The party from Eskside drove over in state, my lord and my lady, with Miss Percival and Val, in the barouche, and with four horses in honour of so great an occasion. They were all in high spirits, with hopes as bright as the morning, though I think Valentine thought more than once how pleasant it would have been to have had little Vi sitting bodkin on the front seat of the carriage between himself and his grandfather. There would have been plenty of room for her, though I don't know that this would have been considered quite a dignified proceeding by my lady. The little town was all astir, and various cheers were raised as Lord Eskside and Val went into the committee room ; and my lady and Mary went on to the hotel which was in their interest,—a heavy, serious, old, grey stone house in the market-place close to the hustings, from one of the windows of which they were to witness the nomination. On the opposite side stood the other hotel where Mr Seisin's supporters congregated. When Lady Eskside took her place at the window specially reserved for her, there was a flutter of movement among the crowd already assembled, and many people turned to look at her with interest scarcely less than that with which they welcomed the candidate and his supporters. Lady Eskside was a great deal older than when we saw her first ; indeed, quite an old lady, over seventy, as was her husband. But she had retained all her activity, her lightness of figure and movement, and the light in her eyes, which shone almost as brightly as ever. The beauty of age is as distinct as, and not less attractive in its way than, the beauty of youth ; the one extremity of life having, like the other, many charms which fail to us commonplace persons in the dull middle-ages, the period of prose which intervenes in every existence. Lady Eskside was a beautiful old woman ; her eyes were bright, her colour almost as sweet and fresh, though a little broken and run into threads, as when she was twenty ; her hair was snow-

white, which is no disadvantage, but the reverse, to a well-tinted face. She had a soft dove-coloured bonnet of drawn or quilted satin coming a little forward round her face, not perched on the top of the head as ladies now wear that necessary article of dress; and a blue ribbon, of Val's colours, round her throat,—though I think, as a matter of choice, she would have preferred red, as “more becoming” to her snowy old beauty. Mary, you may be sure, was in Val's colours too, and was the thorough partisan of the young candidate, however little she had been the partisan of the boy himself in his natural and unofficial character. There was a bright fire blazing in the room behind them to which they could retire when they pleased; and the window was thrown wide open, so that they might both see and hear.

The hotel opposite—not by any mean such a good one as the Duke's Head—was of course in the opposition interest, and blazed with yellow flags and streamers. At the window there, just before the commencement of proceedings, several ladies appeared. They did not come in state like Lady Eskside, for Mr Seisin had no womankind belonging to him; and these feminine spectators were wives and daughters of his supporters, and not so enthusiastic in his cause as they were about their own special relations who intended to perform on the occasion. Among them, in a prominent position, but keeping back as much as possible, Mrs Pringle and Violet were soon descried by the ladies opposite. Neither of them wore anything yellow, as Lady Eskside, with sharp old eyes, undimmed by age, discovered in a moment. “They are both fair, and yellow is unbecoming to fair people,” she said, with involuntary cynicism. I do not much wonder that she was severe upon them; for indeed had they not pretended all manner of kindness and friendship for her boy? “It is not their fault,” said Mary, apologetically. “I wonder what you mean by telling me it is not their fault!” cried Lady Eskside. “Is a man's wife just his housekeeper, that she should have no power over him? They should not have let Sandy Pringle make a fool of himself. They should not have given their consent, and stuck themselves up there in opposition to the family. I have no patience with such women.” It was not wonderful that my lady should disapprove; and I don't think that two greater culprits in feeling than Mrs Pringle and her

daughter were to be found in all Eskside. They had the satisfaction of knowing that the husband and father who had driven them to make this appearance was not unaware of the sentiments with which they regarded it ; but that, I think, was all the comfort these poor ladies had.

Then there came a stir in the crowd, and a thickening and increase of its numbers, as if more had been poured into a vessel nearly full ; and the candidates and their supporters came up to the hustings. How Lady Eskside's heart swelled and fluttered as her handsome boy, a head taller than his old grandfather, appeared on that elevation over the crowd, detached from the rest, not only by his position as the hero of the day, but by his fresh youth, and those advantages of nature which had been so lavishly bestowed upon him ! Lady Eskside looked at him with pride and happiness indescribable, and kissed her hand to him as he turned to salute her at her window ; but I will not venture to describe the feelings of the other ladies, when Val, with, they thought, a reproachful look on his handsome face, took off his hat to them at their opposite window. Mrs Pringle blushed crimson, and pushed back her chair ; and Violet, who was very pale, bent her poor little head upon her mother's shoulder and cried. "Oh, how cruel of papa to set us up here !" sobbed Vi. Mrs Pringle was obliged to keep up appearances, and checked her child's emotion summarily ; but she made up her mind that the cause of this distress and humiliation should suffer for it, though she would not fly in his face by refusing absolutely to appear. These agitated persons did not find themselves able to follow the thread of the proceedings as Lady Eskside did, who did not lose a word that was said, from the speech of Sir John who proposed Val, down to the young candidate's own boyish but animated address, which, and his good looks, and the prestige and air of triumph surrounding him, completely carried away the crowd. Sir John's little address was short, but very much to the purpose. It gave a succinct account of Val. "Born among us, brought up among us—the representative of one of the most ancient and honourable families in the county ; a young man who has distinguished himself at the university, and in every phase of life through which he has yet passed," said Sir John, with genial kindness. Mr Lynton, who seconded Val's nomination, was more political and more prosy. He went into the policy of his party, and all it meant to do, and

the measures of which he was sure his young friend would be a staunch supporter, as his distinguished family had always been. Mr Lynton was cheered, but he was also interrupted and assailed by questions from Radical members of the crowd, and had a harder time of it than Sir John, who spoke largely, without touching abstract principles or entering into details. Mr Lynton was a little hustled, so to speak, and put through a catechism, but on the whole was not badly received.

Val's, however, was the speech of the day. He rushed into it like a young knight-errant, defying and conciliating the crowd in the same breath, with his handsome head thrown back and his young face bright and smiling. "He has no end of way on him," Lord Hightowers said, who stood by, an interested spectator—or rather, metaphorically, ran along the bank, as he had done many a day while Val rowed triumphant races, shouting and encouraging. Val undertook everything, promised everything, with the confidence of his age. He gave a superb assurance to the Radicals in the crowd that it should be the aim of his life to see that the intelligence of the working classes, which had done so much for Great Britain, should have full justice done to it; and to the tenant-farmer on the other side, that the claims of the land, and those who produced the bread of the country, should rank highly in his mind as they ought always to do. The young man believed that everything could be done that everybody wanted; that all classes and all the world could be made happy;—what so easy? And he said so with the sublime confidence of his age, promising all that was asked of him. When Mr Seisin's supporters and himself came after this youthful hero, it is inconceivable what a downfall everybody felt. I am bound to add that Mr Seisin's speech read better than Val's in the paper, and so did that of his own proposer. But that mattered very little at the moment. Val carried the crowd with him, even those of them who were a little unwilling, and tried to resist the tide. The show of hands was triumphantly in his favour. He was infinitely more Liberal than Mr Seisin, and far more Tory than Sir John. He thought every wrong could be redressed, and that every right must conquer: there was no compromise, no moderation, in his triumphant address.

Lady Eskside and Mary made a progress down the High Street when the gentlemen went to the committee rooms,

and saw the Duchess and the Dowager-Duchess, who were both most complimentary. These great ladies had heard Val's speech, or rather had seen it, being too far off to hear very much, from their carriage, where they sat on the outskirts of the crowd. "What fire, what vigour he has!" said the Dowager. "I congratulate you, dear Lady Eskside; though how you could ever think that boy like his father—"

"He is not much like your family at all, is he?" said the Duchess-regnant, with a languid smile. This was the only sting Lady Eskside received during all that glorious day. The old lord and the young candidate joined them ere long, and their drive back was still more delightful to the old couple than the coming. Lord Eskside, however, growled and laughed and shook his head over Val's speech. "You're very vague in your principles," he said. "Luckily you have men at your back that know what they are doing. You must not commit yourself like that, my man, wherever you go, or you'll soon get into a muddle."

"Never mind!" said my lady; "he carried everybody with him; and, once in the House, I have no fear of his principles; he'll be kept all right."

"Luckily for him, the county knows me, and knows he's all right; though he's a young gowk," said the old lord, looking from under his bended eyebrows at his hope and pride. They were more pleased, I think, than if Val had made the most correct of speeches. His exuberance and overflow of generous youthful readiness for everything made the old people laugh, and made them weep. They knew, at the other end of life, how these enthusiasms settle down; but it was delicious to see them spring a perennial fountain, to refresh the fields and brighten the landscape, which of itself is arid enough. They looked at each other, and remembered, fifty years back, how this same world had looked to them—a dreary old world, battered and worn, and going on evermore in a dull repetition of itself, they knew; but as they had seen it once, in all the glamour which they recollect, so it appeared now to Val.

Val himself was so much excited by all that had happened, that he strolled out alone as soon as he had got free, for the refreshment of a long walk. It was the end of March: the trees were greening over; the river, softening in sound, had begun to think of the summer as his banks changed colour;

and the first gowans put out their timid hopeful heads among the grass. Val went on instinctively to the linn, with a minute wound in his heart, through all its exhilarations. He thought it very hard that Vi should not have been near him, that she should not have tied up her pretty hair with his blue ribbon, that she should have been ranged on the other side. It was the only unpleasant incident in the whole day, the only drop in his cup that was not sweet. He explained to himself how it was, and felt that the reason of it was quite comprehensible; but this gives so little satisfaction to the mind. "Of course he must stick to his party," Val murmured to himself between his teeth; and of course Mrs Pringle and Violet could not go against the head of the family in the sight of the world at least. When Val saw, however, a gleam of his own colour between the two great beech-trees he knew so well, he rushed forward, his heart beating lighter. He felt sure that it was Violet's blue gown, which she must have put on, on her return, by way of indemnifying herself for wearing no blue in the morning. He quickened his step almost to a run, going softly over the mossy grass, so that she did not hear him. The sunset was glowing in the west, lighting up the woods with long slanting gleams, and clouds of gorgeous colour, which floated now and then over the trees like chance emissaries from some army where the cohorts were of purple and gold. Vi sat with her face to that glow in the west, under the old beech-tree where the Babes in the Wood had been discovered; but her face was hidden, and she was weeping quite softly, confident in the loneliness of the woods, through which now and then a long sobbing sigh like a child's would break. The pretty little figure thus abandoned to sorrow, the hidden face, the soft curved shoulders, the golden hair catching a gleam of the sunset through the branches, and still more, the pathetic echo of the sob, went to Val's heart. He went up close to her, and touched her shoulder with a light caressing touch. "Vi! what's the matter?" said the boy, half ready to cry too out of tender sympathy, though he was nearly twenty-two, and just about to be elected knight of the shire.

"Oh Val, is it you?" She sprang up, and looked at him with the tears on her cheeks. "Oh, don't speak to me!" cried Violet. "Oh, how can you ask me what is the matter, after what has happened to-day?"

"Is that what you are crying for?" said Val. "Never mind, Vi, dear. I know you have got to stick to your father, and he must stick to his party. It was hard to see you over there on the other side; but if you feel it like this, I don't mind."

"How did you think I should feel it?" cried the girl. "Oh no, you don't mind! you have plenty, plenty better than me to be with you, and stand up for you; but I—I do mind. It goes to my heart."

And here she sat down again, and covered her face once more. Val knelt beside her, and drew away her hands.

"Here was where we sat when we were children," he said softly, to comfort her. "We have always cared more for each other than for any one else; haven't we, Vi? How could I have plenty, plenty to stand by me? wasn't it unkind to say so—when you know you are the one I care for most?"

Violet did not lift up her head, but she cried more softly, letting the voice of the charmer steal into her heart.

"I was savage when I saw you over there," said Val, with his lips very close to her ear. "But you did not put on their ugly colours at least; and now you are all dressed out in mine, and I don't care," said the youth; and he stooped and kissed her blue gown prettily, as a young knight-errant might.

"Oh Val!" cried Violet, with a fresh outburst, but turning towards him; "I thought you would be angry."

"How could I be angry with you, Vi? Should you have been angry if it had been me?"

"Yes," she said quickly; "if I had thought you didn't care." And here she stopped and grew crimson, and turned away her head.

"But you could not suppose that I didn't care," said Val; "that would have been impossible. If you only knew how often I have thought of you while I have been away! It was cruel of you not to let me see you before I went; but when I was gone, I am sure there never was a day, seldom an hour, that I did not think of you, Vi."

She turned round her head to look at him for a moment: there were tears still in her eyes, but very soft ones, a kind of honey-dew. "Did you, Val?" she said, half under her breath.

"Always," said the lad. "I wanted you to see every-

thing I saw. I thought how sweet it would be if we could go everywhere together, as we did when we were children—but not just like that either. You know, don't you, how fond I am of you, Vi?"

"Oh Val!" She was almost as near him as when she fell asleep on his shoulder. "But you must not speak to me so now," she cried suddenly, making an effort to break the innocent spell which seemed to draw them closer and closer; "it makes me wretched. Oh Val, it is not only that we were on the other side this morning. My heart is breaking. I am sure papa means to do something against you, and I cannot stop him. I think my heart will break."

"What can he do against me?" said Val, in his light-hearted confidence; "and he would not if he could. Don't think of such nonsense, Vi, but listen to me. We are not children now, but I am fonder of you than of anybody in the world. Why shouldn't we go everywhere together, be always together. If I might go to your father now and say you belonged to me, he could not carry you off to the other side—could he? Vi," said the lad, a little chilled and anxious, "don't turn your head away, dear. Won't you have me, Vi?"

"Oh Val, wait a little—I daren't listen to you now. I should be afraid to say a word."

"Afraid, Vi, to say anything to me—except that you don't care for me!" said Valentine, holding her fast. "Look me in the face, and you could never have the heart to say that."

Violet did not say anything good or bad, but she turned softly to him: her face met his eyes as a child turns to a mother or a flower to the sun, and they kissed each other tenderly under the great beech boughs where they had sat leaning against each other, two forlorn babies, ten long years before. The scene now was the completion of the scene then. What explanations were wanted between the children? they had loved each other all along; no one else had so much as come within the threshold of either heart. They clung together, feeling it so natural, murmuring in each other's ears with their heads so close; the sunset glowing, then fading about them, till the green glade under the beeches was left in a silvery grey calm of evening, instead of that golden glow. The Babes in the Wood had forgotten themselves. Violet at last discovered with a start,

how changed the light was and how embrowned the evening. She started from her young lover's arm.

"Oh, how late it is!" she cried. "Oh, what will they think at home? I must go. I must go at once, or they will think I am lost."

"We have been lost before now," said Val, taking it much more easily. "But it *is* late, and there's a dinner and fine people at Rossraig. Oh Vi, what a bore, what a bore! Can't you come with me?—not this night when so much has happened, not this one night?"

"Indeed you are very bold to speak of such a thing," said Vi, with dignity; "and you must not come with me either," she said, mournfully. "Oh Val, I am afraid we have gone and made things worse. I told you not to speak."

"Very likely that I should not speak!" said Val. "But, Vi, look here; now that it is settled, you may come with grandmamma on Thursday, mayn't you? I cannot have you on the other side now."

"But I *am* on the other side," said Vi, with some loftiness. "I am a Liberal myself. I should never have opposed you, Val, or worn anybody else's colours, even if I had not—cared for you; but I am a Liberal as well as papa."

"You must be a Tory when you belong to me," said Val.

"Never!" cried Violet; and she shook his arm away and stood independent, with eyes glowing and cheek flushing. Valentine was half angry, half amused, with a man's instinctive sense of the futility of such protestations. How delightful it was! almost a first quarrel, though their engagement was not an hour old!

"Well, then, you shall be a little Radical if you like—so long as you come," he said. "I give in; but you must come with us for the election. I have set my heart on that; otherwise I shall stand up on the hustings," cried Val, "and say, That young lady is going to be my wife, and this is how she treats me. I swear, if you are not with grandmamma, I will—"

"How foolish you boys are!" said Vi; and she took his arm, as if, they both thought, they had been old engaged people, or married people (it did not much matter which). And in this way they made their charmed progress through the wood, forgetting the passage of time till they came to the

brae at the Hewan, where Violet, with some terror, dismissed her lover. "You shall not come any farther," she said; "you shall not. I don't mean you to see papa to-night. Oh Val, Val! what shall I do if he means to do you any harm?"

"Tell him he will be harming you," said Val; but how lightly he took her terror! what could Mr Pringle or any man do to him? He was at the high topgallant of success and happiness, almost intoxicated with all the good things that had come to him, and with the young innocent love which rose warm as a summer stream and as soft, fed by all the springs of his heart, growing with all the growth of his life. It was very hard to leave her there, and make his way to his dinner and his politics; but still it had to be done, though Violet stamped her little foot in impatience before he would go. When they parted at last, Val sped along the twilight woods like an arrow, with nothing but triumph and delight in him. He had plucked the last flower of happiness, to wear in his bosom for ever; there seemed to be nothing wanted to the perfection of the moment, and of his life.

As for Violet, she was far from being so happy. She went up the brae more leisurely, in no hurry to go in. Poor child! all her anxieties came back to her with double force. How was she to tell this, how to keep it secret? the one was almost as hard as the other. And then the great chimera in her mind, which she tried to say to herself was nothing, nothing! that dread which she could not explain or define—the consciousness that her father was going to do something against Val. What could she do to hinder him? She shrank from encountering his sharp looks, from telling him her story,—and yet was it not her duty to make one final effort? She went round the new buildings to the little old front of the cottage, which still commanded that view over the Esk which Violet loved so well. Her father was walking about alone smoking his cigar. No one else was visible. The peace of evening had fallen upon the house; but it was cold after the sunset, and Mrs Pringle had not come out to cheer her husband while he smoked his cigar; indeed, to tell the truth, he was not sufficiently in his wife's good graces to have this indulgence. If Vi, his favourite child, could do anything, now was the moment. Her heart began to beat violently as she stood and looked at him,

hesitating, drawn forward by one impulse and back by another. A mere chance movement settled the question. He held out his hand to her as she stood looking at him. "Come, Vi, give me your company," he said; "your mother thinks it too cold to come out. Where have you been, child, so late?"

"I have been down at the linn," said Violet; "it is always so pretty there."

"But you need not have forgotten your dinner, my dear; your mother does not like it; and I thought you were tired after your drive to Castleton," said Mr Pringle, in slightly reproachful tones.

"I am not tired, papa; I was a little—troubled in my mind. Papa, must we go on the election day, and put ourselves up again, against Val? Oh papa, why? might we not stay at home at least? That is what I was thinking of. Valentine never did any harm to us, papa."

"Has not he?" said Mr Pringle, fiercely. "You are a goose, Vi, and know nothing about it; you had better not speak of what you don't understand."

"Why shouldn't I understand?" said Violet, roused. "I am just as able to understand as any one. The only harm Val has done is by being born, and how could he help that? But papa, dear," said the girl, twining her arm suddenly within his, and leaning on him closely—"that was not what I was thinking of. Down at the linn, where we used to be so much together, how could I help thinking? Val was always so—" Vi paused, with injudicious words on her lips which she stopped just in time—"nice to me," she added, with a quick breath of fright at her own temerity. "Even the boys were never so good to me; they never took me out into the woods to play truant. Oh papa, if you could only know how delightful it was!"

"He might have broken your neck," said the obdurate father. "I owe him something for the fright he gave us that day."

"What fright did he give you? Mamma has told me since she was not a bit frightened. It was the very sweetest—no, almost the very sweetest," said Violet, a little thrill of tremulous happiness going through her heart, which told of a sweeter still—"day of my life. He took as much care of me as if I had been—his sister; more than the boys

ever take. Oh papa ! and to sit up yonder against him, as if we were not friends with Val. He is the only one who does not blame you a bit," said Violet, unused to secrets, and betraying herself once more.

"He ! you have seen him, then ? It is very kind of him certainly not to blame me," said Mr Pringle, with a smile.

"He says, of course you must stick to your party," said Violet. "I just met him—for a moment—in the wood. He was not angry, though I should have been angry in his place. He said it was very hard to see mamma and me over there, but that of course we could not help it ; and that he was sure you would not really harm him even if you could."

Mr Pringle was not a bad man, and his whole being was quaking at that moment with something he had done. Like many another amiable person, led astray by a fixed idea, he had brooded over his injury till it filled all earth and heaven, and made every kind of revenge seem lawful and natural, until, as the climax of a world of brooding, he had launched the deadly shaft he had been pointing and preparing so long. Now it was done, and a cold chill of doubt lest it were ill done had seized upon him. He had called Violet to him on purpose to escape from this, and lo ! Violet seized upon him too, like an angel of penitence. He paused a moment, casting a perturbed glance towards Lasswade, whence probably by this time his shaft had been launched—poor little innocent village, under its trees ! Had there been time to draw back I almost think he would have done it ; but as there was not time, Mr Pringle took the only alternative. He shook off his daughter's arm, and told her to go in to her mother, and concern herself with things she understood ; and that when he wanted her advice and her friend Val's, he would ask for it, not sooner. "A couple of babies !" he said contemptuously, not perceiving, in his remorse, and resentment, and sore impatience, that even now he had linked the name of his young enemy, upon whom he had revenged himself, with that of his favourite child.

CHAPTER XXVII.

So early as next morning the messenger of vengeance had gone like a fiery cross all over Eskside—up the water and down the water, placarded in the hamlets, sent flying by the post over all the county. It came by the morning's post to Rossraig itself. The man who went for the letters got a copy from somebody, which was given with much solemnity and secrecy to Harding the butler for his private information. The upper servants laid their heads together over it in the housekeeper's room with fright, and yet with that almost agreeable excitement which moves a little community when any great event happens to the heads of it. Excitement is sweet, howsoever it comes ; and the grim pleasure which servants often seem to enjoy even in "a death in the family," is curious to behold. This was much more piquant than a death, and nobody could tell to what it might lead ; and then there was the thrilling suspense as to who should venture to tell it to my lord and my lady, and how they would take it when they found it out.

As was to be expected, it was through Harding's elaborate care to keep it from his master that it was found out. Lord Eskside was in his library before breakfast, very busy with his lists of voters, and the calculations of each district and polling-place, all of which agreed so delightfully in the certain majority which must carry Val triumphantly to his place in Parliament—a triumph which, all the more perfect that it was late, filled the old lord's heart. His wrinkled forehead was smoothed out as if he had swallowed an elixir of life ; his shaggy eyebrows, almost white now, were still, or nearly so ; his under lip had subsided peacefully. How many disappointments had passed over that rugged old head ! His son Richard had been nothing but one disappointment from beginning to end, sometimes giving acute pain—always a dormant dissatisfaction to his parents. For years and years he had been lost to them altogether : he had sinned like a prodigal, bringing in a wild and miserable romance into the family records, without making up for his sin by the prodigal's compensating qualities,—the readiness to confess, the humility of asking pardon. Richard had done badly by his family, yet was as proud, and

took up as superior a position, as if he had done well. He had not only disappointed but scorned his father's hopes. Neither father nor mother had any comfort in him, any good of him, any more than if they had no son.

But there was recompense for all their suffering in Val ; he was altogether their own, their creation : and the pleasure with which the old lord found all his hopes realising themselves in this boy, who was still young enough to be under his own influence, to take his opinions as a kind of *credo* and symbol of faith, to carry out his wishes, and take up the inheritance of the Rosses, as he had perfected and filled it up during his long life—was, I think, far greater, more perfect and delightful, than the success of any middle-aged man like Richard, who, as old Jean Moffatt said, was quite as old if not older than himself, could have given him. There were a hundred things in Richard's character that jarred upon his father, which his good sense made him accept and submit to, knowing how hopeless it would be to attempt to shape a man of the world, who half despised even while he respected his rustic father, into anything like his own image. But there was nothing yet which was grieving or contradictory in Val. The boy was passionate, but then every boy had some defect ; and a little wayward and wilful if roused, but always submissive as a child to the arguments of affection, and candid to understand when he was wrong. Lord Eskside saw with fond eyes of affection, and heard from every one—scholastic Grinders, and persons in society, and men of the world—that no more promising lad could be than this hero of his, who had accepted all his schemes and fallen in with all his views. To attain this rare pleasure in your old age is not a common blessing, and it was all the more exquisite because he knew how rare it was.

In this state of mind he rose from his library table and his lists of voters, and stalked out with his hands clasped under his coat tails, to look at the great registering thermometer which hung outside on the shady corner at the west wing. When he came into the hall, Lord Eskside saw Harding in the distance, poring over a paper which he held in his hand,—a large white broadsheet, very much like Val's address, of which there were some copies about the house. Harding's obtusity was a joke with the old lord. "Has he not got the sense of it into his old noddle yet ?" he

said to himself, half laughing, and watched with quiet amusement the butler's absorption. Lord Eskside's patience, however, was none of the longest, and he called Harding before many seconds had passed. The man was too much occupied to hear him, and did not stir. Then the old lord, half irritated, half laughing, called again. "If that's Mr Ross's address you are reading, bring it here, you haverel, and I'll explain it to you," he said. Harding turned round with a scared look, and, crushing up the paper in his hand, he thrust it into his pocket with hurried and almost ostentatious panic.

"It's not Mr Ross's address, my lord," he said.

"Hey! what is it then?—let me see. Lord bless us, man!" said his irascible master, "why do you put on that look? What is it? Let me see!"

"I assure you, my lord, it's nothing—nothing of the least consequence," said Harding. "Your lordship would not look twice at it; it's nothing, my lord." And he put his hand upon his pocket, as if to defend that receptacle of treason, and stood with the air of the hero in the poem—

"Come one, come all, this rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I."

Harding, for the first time in his life, was melodramatic in his determination to give his blood sooner than the objectionable paper. While the old lord stood looking at him half alarmed, and becoming more and more impatient, Mrs Harding strayed from her room, which was within reach of the voices, as it was her habit to do when her husband was audible in too prolonged colloquy with my lord.

"Marg'ret," said Lord Eskside, "what has that haverel of a man of yours got in his pocket? I never can get a word of sense out of him, as you well know."

"Hoots, my lord, it's some of his nonsense papers. What have you in your pocket, man? Cannot you give my lord a sensible answer? It's some of the squibs or things about yon auld Seisin, the lawyer body that's set up against us,—a bonnie like thing in our county, that has never had a Whig member as lang as I can mind."

"That's true," said Lord Eskside, mollified; "it's scarcely worth the trouble to publish any squibs. Let's see it, Harding,—and don't look so like a gowk, if you can help it. What is the matter with the man?"

" Give it him without more ado," whispered Mrs Harding peremptorily to her spouse. " He maun see it sooner or later, and he'll think we've something to do wi' it if you keep it back. Here's the paper, my lord. Na, it's no a squib on auld Seisin. I'm thinking it's something on the other side."

" What do you mean by the other side ? " said Lord Eskside, his eyebrows beginning to work as he snatched it out of her hand.

" Nae doubt they have their squibs too," said Mrs Harding, making her escape with as unconcerned a face as possible. Her husband, on the contrary, stood gaping and pale with horror, not knowing what thunderbolt might burst upon him now.

The old lord smoothed the crumpled paper, and held it out before him at a distance to read it without his spectacles. He stood so for a moment, and then he went back into the library, and shut the door. About half an hour after he rang the bell, and asked that my lady should be called. " Ask Lady Eskside to be so good as to come to me here," he said, in strange subdued tones, without looking up. This was a very unusual summons. In all the common affairs of life he went to her, and it was only when something more grave than usual happened in the house that Lord Eskside sent for his wife. He did not rise when she came in, which she did at once, her old face flushed with alarm. All the ruddy rustic colour had gone out of my lord's face ; his very hand was pallid which held the paper. He drew a chair close to him with his other hand, and called to her impatiently, " Come here, Catherine, come here ! "

" What has happened ? " Her eye ran over the papers on the table, looking for the yellow cover of a telegram—thinking of her absent son, as mothers do. If it was nothing about Richard, it could not be anything very terrible. Having satisfied herself on this point, she sat down by him, and put her hand upon his arm. " My dear, you are not well ? "

" Never mind me," he said ; " I am well enough. Read that."

Lady Eskside looked at it, wondering, then looked up at him, gave a low cry, and drew it towards her. This was what she read :—

“To the free and independent Electors of Eskshire.

“GENTLEMEN,—You were called upon to listen to, applaud, and accept certain statements yesterday, coming from no less a person than Sir John Gifford, and other great personages of the county, which it may perhaps be well to examine dispassionately before acting on them so far as to send to Parliament as your representative a young man possessing no real right to such an honour.

“I mean to say nothing against the gentleman calling himself, and called by others, Mr Valentine Ross. He is young and absolutely untried; therefore, though it cannot be said that he has done anything to justify his claims on your support, it is equally true that he has done nothing to invalidate them, so far as he possesses any. This, however, is the fundamental question which I wish to assist you to examine. What are his claims upon you? They are those of Lord Eskside’s grandson, heir of one of the most considerable families in the county—a family well known and respected by all of us, and about whose principles there can be no doubt, any more than of their high honour and estimation in the district. These are the pretensions of the party who support Mr Ross as a candidate for your suffrages. Sir John Gifford—and no one can respect Sir John more than I do, or would give more weight to his opinion—introduced his name to you with high eulogies, as ‘one born among us, brought up among us, the heir of one of the most ancient and honourable families in the county.’ Now the question I have to lay before you is straightforward and simple—‘Is this true?’ Sir John’s first statement is of course to be taken as a figure of speech, and I will not be so ungracious as to press it, for we all know that the young gentleman in question was not born among us. He made his first appearance at Eskside, as most of you are aware, when a child of about seven years old. How did he make his first appearance? Was he brought home carefully, out of one comfortable nursery into another, under the charge of suitable nurses and attendants, as our own children are, and as it is natural to suppose the son of the Honourable Richard Ross—a man holding an important appointment in Her Majesty’s diplomatic service, and the heir of an old title and very considerable estate—would be? I answer, unhesitatingly, No. The

child, in the dress and with the appearance of a tramp-child, was brought to Lord Eskside's door by a female tramp—a wandering vagrant—who lodged that night in a low tavern in the neighbourhood. He was thrust in at the door, and left there without a word; and equally without a word he was received. The persons who were present know that no message nor letter nor token of any kind was sent with the child. He was left like a parcel at Lord Eskside's door. Lord Eskside immediately after announced to the world that his grandson had been sent to him, to be brought up at home. And the child thus strangely introduced, without mother, without pedigree, without resemblance, without a single evidence of his identity, is the young gentleman who is known to us by the name of Mr Valentine Ross, and who now asks our suffrages on his family's merits rather than his own.

“Gentlemen, I am not one to disregard any claim which a man, who has in any way served his country, makes upon his own merits. To such a man I reckon it an impertinence to ask any question as to his pedigree. But when a young man says to me, Elect me, because I am my father's son, I ask, Is it certain that he is the son of the man he claims as father? All that we know of his history is against it. His reputed father has studiously kept out of the way. Why, if he is Richard Ross's son, whom we all know, is not Richard Ross here to acknowledge him? Instead of Richard Ross, we have nothing but a fond old man who has adopted an ingratiating boy. Lord Eskside has a right to adopt whom he pleases; but he has no right to set up some base-born pretender—some chance child thrown on his bounty—as the heir of his honours and the representative of his family. Will you send to Parliament, as a Ross of Eskside, an old man's pet and pensioner, a supposititious heir? or will you not rather demand a searching inquiry into a history so mysterious, before you strengthen, by your election of him, the pretended rights of an impostor? He may be an innocent impostor, for I say nothing against the young man in his own person; but until his claims have been investigated, and some reasonable evidence afforded, an impostor he must be considered by all Eskside men whose ambition it is to have everything about them honest and above-board.

“AN ESKSIDE ELECTOR.”

“The demons!” cried Lady Eskside. Hot tears were shining in her eyes, forced there by pressure of rage and shame. She clenched her hand in spite of herself. “Oh, the word’s not bad enough! Devils themselves would have more heart.”

“It’s Sandy Pringle’s doing,” said the old lord. “I thought he was too mim and mild. He’s been preparing it these dozen years; and now the moment’s come, and he’s struck home.”

“It’s too bad for Sandy Pringle,” said the old lady, pushing her chair from the table. “Oh no, no; it’s too bad for that; the man has bairns of his own.”

And the tears ran down her cheeks with sheer pain. “We were never ill to anybody,” she moaned; “never hard-hearted that I know of. Oh, my poor old lord!—just when your heart was light, and you had your way!”

She turned upon him in the midst of her own pain with a pathetic pity, and the two pairs of tremulous old hands clasped each other closely with that sympathy which is far deeper than any words. I do not think it would have taken much to bring a tear down the old lord’s rugged cheek as well as his wife’s. The blow had gone straight to his heart. Pain—helpless, bitter, penetrating, against which the sufferer surprised by it can do nothing but make a speechless appeal to heaven and earth—was the chief sensation in his mind. He was so unprepared and open to attack, so happy and proud, glad and rejoicing in the last evening lights, which were so sweet. For the first moment neither of them could think—they could only feel the pain.

Then there came a sense of what had to be done, which roused the old pair from the pang of the first shock. “It will be all over the county this morning,” said Lord Eskside. “Of that we may be sure. A man could not be bad enough to do so much without being bad enough to do more. We’ll say nothing about it here, Catherine; especially, we’ll tell the boy nothing about it. Leave him at peace for the moment; to-morrow he is sure to hear; but in the mean time, as soon as breakfast is over, I’ll make some excuse, and drive over to Castleton. We’ll keep him out of the way. I’ll see Lynton, and Sir John, and as many more of the committee as I can, and consult what’s to be done.”

“You’ll tell them how false it all is, and how devilish,” said my lady; “devilish, that is the only word.”

"Devilish, if you please," said Lord Eskside ; "but how am I to say it's false ! Half the county know it's true."

Lady Eskside stopped the contradiction which came to her lips. She wrung her hands in that impotence which it is so much harder on the strong to bear than on the weak.

"Oh, that woman ! that woman !" she cried ; "the harm she has done to me and mine !"

"I will lay the whole matter before them," said Lord Eskside ; "there is nothing else for it now—they must hear everything. At times it may be prudent to hold your peace ; but when you must speak, you must speak freely. I will tell them everything. It would have been better to have done it long ago."

"Oh, what is the need of telling them ?" cried my lady—"do you think they don't know ? Ay, as well as we do ; but do what seems to you good, my good man. It's like to break my heart ; but I am most sorry for you, my dear, my dear !"

"Dry your eyes now, Catherine," he said, hoarsely ; "we must not show our old eyes red to strangers. Come, the bell has rung, and we'll all be the better of our prayers."

They went in, arm in arm, to the great dining-room, where the servants were waiting, more curious than can be described, to see how my lord and my lady "were taking it." They had no satisfaction, I am glad to say. The old lord read his short "chapter," and the short prayer which followed, in a tone in which the most eager ear could detect no faltering. And my lady, if perhaps not so buoyant in her aspect as yesterday, did not betray herself even to Mary Percival, who knelt calmly by her side, and did not know how her old heart was sinking.

"We will give you a holiday to-day, Val," Lord Eskside said, after breakfast ; "but for me, I will drive over to Castleton and see how everything is going on."

Val, who had visions of rushing up to the Hewan, and who felt himself perfectly safe in his grandfather's hands, consented gaily. "If you are sure you don't want me," he said ; and the old man drove off smiling, waving his hand to the ladies at the door. Harding and the other servants were very much puzzled by their master. They had thought it not unlikely that he might afford them still further excitement by fainting dead away or going off in a fit.

I do not know which had the hardest task—Lord Esk-

side telling the story of his son's marriage, with all its unfortunate consequences, to the serious county magnates assembled round the table of the committee room, and looking as grave as though Valentine had committed high treason—or his wife at home, trying to look as if nothing had happened, and to keep Val by her side that he might not hear of the assault upon him. At one period of the day at least my lady's work was the hardest. It was when Val insisted upon having from her a message to Violet Pringle or her mother, asking that the girl might accompany her next morning to see the election.

"Violet Pringle," cried the old lady, tingling in every vein with resentment and indignation—"of all the people in the world, why should I take her father's daughter about with me? You are crazy, Val."

"Perhaps I am," said Val, with unusual gravity and humility; "but if I am crazy, I am still more crazy than you think. Grandma, I want you to take Vi about with you everywhere. Don't you know what friends she and I have always been? Listen, and don't be angry, Granny dear. When all this is over, and there is time to think of anything, I want you to give your blessing to Vi and me. She is going to be my wife."

The old lady gave a scream: it was nothing else. She was wild for the moment with wonder, and anger, and horror. "Never! never! it must never be! Your wife!" she cried. "Oh, Val, you are mad. It can never be!"

"How can you say it can never be, when it *is*?" said Val, gently, with the smile of secure and confident happiness. "Yes, I don't mind Mary hearing, as she is there. Last night I met Vi in the woods. I was half mad, as you say, to think they had kept her away from me on such a day. I asked her to promise that it should never be so any more; and now nothing can come between us," said the young man in the confidence of youth. The idea of any strenuous objections on the part of the old people, who had yielded to every wish he had formed all his life, did not occur to him. Why should they object? He knew no reason. He had not announced it last night because there was a great dinner-party, and the house was full of strangers, but not because he felt any alarm as to how his news would be received.

"Val, I tell you you are mad," said Lady Eskside, deeply

flushed with anger, of which she did not venture to show all the causes. "Your grandfather will never hear of it for a moment. Sandy Pringle has always been your enemy—always! and has he not shown himself so, openly, now?"

"Oh, of course he must stick to his party," said Val, lightly. "As for being my *enemy*, that is nonsense. Why should we be melodramatic? I am sure he wishes me well in his heart."

"A likely story!" said the old lady, her old cheeks blazing hotter and hotter; and when Val announced his intention of going off at once to make his proposal known to Mr Pringle, and claim his consent, the passionate resentment and indignation which she strove to suppress were almost too much for her. She bade the boy remember that he owed it to his grandfather at least to tell him first of so important a step, but at last had to come down to arguments of convenience and expediency. "You may be sure Sandy Pringle is not at the Hewan to-day. He has too much mischief in hand to stay there in his hole. He is at work, doing you all the harm he can, the old sneak-drawer!" said the indignant old lady—not daring to put half her indignation into words.

"As he is to be my father-in-law, you must be more civil to him, grandmamma," said Val, half laughing at her vehemence. He gave in at last, very reluctantly, to put off his going for the day. But even when this was attained, Lady Eskside's work was but half done, for Val had to be kept at home if possible, kept occupied and amused, that he might not discover prematurely the cruel attack of which he was the victim. She was afraid he might do something rash, and compromise himself before the election. In the excitement of that day itself, and when the business was too near completion to be capable of being deranged by any hot-headed folly poor Val might be guilty of, the risk would be less—or so at least the old people thought.

Thus things went on until the evening. Lord Eskside had fortunately left some business behind him to be completed, which gave Val occupation, and my lady had a moment of ease in which she could confide all that had happened to Mary. This last complication about Violet made everything so much the worse. Lady Eskside would have thought Sandy Pringle's daughter a poor enough match for her boy at any time; but now! Her only trust was that Mrs Pringle

was a sensible woman, and might see the necessity of putting a stop to it ; but with the precedent of his father's reckless marriage before him, and Val's hot and hasty disposition, the old lady's heart sank at the prospect. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," she said at last, letting fall a silent tear or two, as she sat with Mary waiting in the dusk of the evening for her husband's return. "My poor old lord is long of coming ; he'll be worn to death with this terrible day."

Lord Eskside was very late. The dressing-bell had rung, and the ladies were lingering, waiting for him in the pale dusk, which had come on earlier than usual. The time and the season and the hour were very much like that other bleak night, fifteen years ago, when Val came first to Ross-craig. There was no storm, but it had been raining softly all the afternoon, refreshing the country, but darkening the skies, and increasing the depression of all who were disposed to be depressed. Val had gone out in the rain into the woods after his day's work, not knowing why it was that some uneasiness in the house had taken hold upon him, some sense of contradictoriness and contrariety. Were things going wrong somehow, that had been so triumphantly right ? or what was it that irritated and oppressed him ? The ladies, in their anxiety, which he was not allowed to share, were glad when he went away, releasing them from all necessity for dissimulation. They sat in different parts of the room, not even talking to each other, listening to the rain, to the taps of the wet branches upon the windows, and all the hushed sounds of a rainy night. Lady Eskside had her back to the window, but, for that very reason, started with the greater excitement when a sound more distinct than the taps of the branches—the knocking of some one for admission, and a low plaintive voice—came to her ear, mingled with the natural sounds of the night. Crying out, "Mary, for God's sake ! who is it ?" she rose up from her chair. Just about the time and the moment when one of the boys was brought to her ! I think for the time the old lady's mind was confused with the pain in it. She thought it was Val's mother come back at last with the other boy.

A little figure, young and light, was standing outside the window in the rain,—not Val's mother, in her worn and stormy beauty, but poor little Violet in her blue cloak, the hood drawn over her golden hair—her eyes, which had been

pathetic at their gayest moment, beseeching now with a power that would have melted the most obdurate. "Oh, my lady, let me in, let me in!" cried Vi. Lady Eskside stood for a minute immovable. "Her heart turned," as she said afterwards, against this trifling little creature that was the cause of so much trouble (though how poor Vi, who suffered most, could be the cause, heaven knows!—people are not logical when they are in pain). Then I think it was the rain that moved her, and not the child's pleading face. She could not have left her enemy's dog, let alone his daughter, out in that drenching rain. She went across the room, slow and stately, and opened the window. But when Violet in her wet cloak came in, Lady Eskside gave her no encouragement. "This is a wet night for you to be out," was all she said.

"Oh, Lady Eskside!" said poor Violet, throwing herself down in a heap at the old lady's feet—"I have come to ask your pardon on my knees. Oh, you cannot think we knew of it, mamma and I. She is ill, or she would have been here too. Oh, my lady, my lady, think a moment! if it is hard for you, it is worse for us. It will kill mamma; and my heart is broken, my heart is broken!" cried poor little Vi.

"Miss Pringle, I do not think, on the spur of the moment, that there is much to be said between you and me."

"Oh, my lady!" Violet cried out, as if she had been struck, at the sound of her own name.

"Nothing to be said," continued Lady Eskside, though her voice wavered. "Who would blame you, poor thing—or your mother either? but between your father's family and mine what can there be to say? That is not a fit posture for a young lady. We are not in a theatre, but private life," said the old lady, severely calm. "If you will rise up and put off your wet cloak, I will order the carriage to take you home."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Violet, rising to her feet. Her soft eyes sent forth an answering flash; her pale little face flushed over. "If you will not have any pity—I meant nothing else, my lady—will you tell—Val," she added, with a hysterical sob rising in her throat, "that he is not to think any more of what he said last night. I'll—forget it. It cannot be now, whatever—might have been. Oh, Mary," cried the girl, turning to Miss Percival, whom she saw for

the first time—"tell him ! I never, never can look him in the face again."

"If you please, my lady," said Harding, appearing at the door in the darkness, "my lord has just come home ; and he would be glad to see your ladyship in his own room."

Lady Eskside hurried away. She did not pause even to look again at the suppliant whom she had repulsed. Violet stood looking after her, wistful, incredulous. The girl could not think it was anything but cruelty ; perhaps at the bottom of her poor little distracted soul she had hoped that the old lady, who was always so kind to her, would have accepted her heart-broken apology, and refused to accept her renunciation. She could not believe that such a terrible termination of all things was possible, as that Lady Eskside should leave her without a word. She turned to Mary, and tottered towards her, with such a look of surprised anguish as went to Miss Percival's heart.

"My dear, my dear, don't look so heart-broken ! She has gone to hear what has happened. She is very, very anxious. Come to my room, and change your wet things, my poor little Vi."

"No, no ! Not another moment ! Let me go, let me go !" cried the girl, escaping from her hold ; and, with the swiftness of youth and passion, Violet turned and fled, through the open window by which she had entered, out into the darkness, the rain, and the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VALENTINE, poor boy, was in his room dressing for dinner, fearing and knowing nothing of all that was happening, when Violet made that hapless visit to throw herself on Lady Eskside's mercy. He was whistling softly before his glass, tying his necktie and chafing at the thought that tomorrow must again be a blank day on which he could not see her—and that only after the election could everything be settled. He was uneasy and restless, he did not know why, with a sensation of something in the air which he did not understand, but which made him by moments vaguely un-

happy. When he began to dress he had seen from his window, or thought he saw, old Jean Moffatt, with a huge umbrella, standing at the corner of the path which led into the woods, and had sent down his man in great eagerness to ask if any note had come for him, thinking the old woman might have been Love's messenger for lack of a better. But there was no note, and Val consoled himself, in that delicious sense of the poetic elevation of being in love which is so sweet to girls and boys, with thinking that his Violet was so much the centre of his thoughts as to throw her sweet shadow upon everything. Few people fully estimate the happiness of a young lover, even when separated from the beloved object, in being able to make such delightful reflections. Val dressed and came down-stairs, all unconscious of what it was which had made the rain beat in upon the carpet in the drawing-room. "Why, you must have had the windows open! What an idea in such a night—with the wind due west!" he said. But even Mary, though she gave him a warning look which he could not understand, said nothing to him; and dinner passed off as usual, though somehow more quietly. Lord Eskside was tired—worn out with his long day's work. "And I am tired too," said my lady; "it is the weather, I suppose. I think we should all go early to bed, to be fresh for to-morrow." When the gentlemen were left alone, the old lord called Val to him. "We will take our wine in the library; I have a great deal to say to you, my boy," he said, leading the way into his own particular retirement. And then the worst moment of Val's life came to him unawares. He felt already that there was something to be revealed, from the moment they entered the room in which he had always received his admonitions when a child, and which was associated to him—but up to this time how lightly!—with all the clouds and shadows of his early life.

"Sit down here, Val," said the old lord. "You must pluck up a heart, for there's something unpleasant coming. Not of any consequence, or that can affect you seriously—but very unpleasant. Val, in every election there's things of this kind," he continued, slowly unfolding a paper. "I've seen a great deal worse. I've seen ill deeds, that a man had forgotten for twenty or thirty years, raked up to bring shame on his grey hairs. Thank God, there's nothing of that kind possible with you! But it's unpleasant enough, unpleasant enough."

"For heaven's sake, sir, tell me what it is at once ! Don't keep me in this suspense."

"Val," said the old lord, almost sternly, "no passion, sir ! none of your outbursts ! I'll almost think it's true, and that you're not of my race, if you cannot set your teeth and bear it like a man."

After this adjuration, which was very necessary, I think Val would have let himself be torn to pieces sooner than "give way." He read the paper in the dim library, lighted only round the table at which they sat, the wall all dark with books, the dark curtains drawn over the windows, the fire without a glimmer in it. Lord Eskside sat watching the lad from under his shaggy eyebrows. So far as he was himself concerned, the old lord had worn out all capacity of feeling in the work he had gone through that day. He had revealed to his friends, in full detail, what he considered as the shame of his family, and had done so like a Stoic, without showing any emotion ; but now he watched Val, tender as a mother over her baby, following the boy's eyes from line to line, his starts of indignation and pain, the furious colour that came over his face, the quick-drawn panting breath, which showed the immense constraint he put on himself. Lord Eskside put out his hand once or twice, and laid it on Val's arm with an instinctive caress, which from him was more than an embrace would have been from another. Val took a long time to read it, for the struggle was hard ; not that the sense of it did not flash into his mind almost in a moment, with all those curious sensations of familiarity—as if it had happened before, or as if we had known and expected it all our lives—which so often attend a great event. When he laid it down at last, he turned to his grandfather, his face partially distorted by that strange dilation of suppressed pain which seems to change every line of the countenance. "This, then, I suppose, was what my father meant," he said.

"Your father ! What did he say ? Did he warn you ? Val, I would not be hard upon your father—but we are reaping the whirlwind, you and me, for the wind he has sown."

"He told me that all a man's antecedents, all the secrets of his life were raked up. He should have said, the secrets of other people's lives," said Val, with a short and bitter

laugh. Then he added, dropping his voice, "I suppose it is all true."

"All true to the facts, that is the devilishness of it. Val, can your recollection carry you further back than your coming here?"

Val shook his head. A deep, hot, crimson flush covered his face. How could he put into shape the vague reminiscences as of a dream—of childish wanderings, sports, and troubles. He recollects nothing that could be put into words, and yet something like the confused images of a dream.

"Is she living still—my mother?" he said, in a very low voice.

"For all we know," said Lord Eskside. "If she was dead, I think we must have heard somehow. I have often thought you ought to be told, Val. God knows, many a hard hour's thinking it's given me. You had a brother, too. Probably he is dead long ago; for children die, I hear, like sheep, with all the exposure of that wild life."

Val shuddered in spite of himself. His brother had faded away altogether out of his recollection, and he felt but little interest in the suggestion of him. No doubt he must be dead long ago. Val could not realise himself in such a relationship. It was impossible. He escaped from the thought of it. The thought of a mother, and such a mother, was sufficiently bewildering and painful.

"But there is time enough for considering this part of the subject," said the old lord. "In the mean time, Val, I've been at Castleton, working hard all day. I have seen almost everybody it was important to see."

"Why did you not take me with you? If I had but known—"

"It was better you should not know. I did better without you. They all know the true state of the case now—and you are prepared to meet them. And, Val, I may say to you, which is of more importance than saying it to them—that though that devilish paper is true enough, I am as sure you are my son Richard's son, as if you had never left my sight since the day you were born."

Val looked at him with hasty surprise. The tears came in a rush to the young man's eyes. "Do you need to tell me this, grandfather?" he cried piteously, and covered his face with his hands. All that he had read had not made

his position real to him, like those words from the old man, whom he had so confidently laid claim to all his life.

"No, no, no ! I was wrong—forgive me," cried the old lord. "But come, Val," he added, quickly ; "we must meet this difficulty with our best courage. We must not allow it to weigh us down. When you face the public to-morrow, there must be no sign either of depression or of passion. You must keep steady—as steady as you were before you knew a word of it—and confident as at the nomination ; there must be no change. Can you trust yourself to meet your enemies so ? It is the only way."

The lad put his hand into the old man's and grasped it, crushing the feeble fingers. "I will," he said, setting his teeth. This was almost all that was said between them. When they parted for the night, the old lord took him by the shoulders, shaking him, as he pretended. This gentle violence was the greatest demonstration of tenderness of which, in his old-fashioned reserve, he was capable. "Go to your bed, my boy, and rest well before to-morrow's trial," he said.

All this time there had not been a word said about the author of the placard which, next morning as they drove into Castleton, was to be seen on every wall, in every village, near every house they passed. Valentine recognised, with a heightened colour, the first copy of it he saw, but said not a word, restraining himself, and turning his eyes away. In Castleton the whole town was placarded with it, and the streets brimming over with excitement. Wherever the carriage passed with its four horses, the groups which were gathered round, reading it, would stop, and pause, and turn to gaze at the handsome young fellow, the very flower of the country, who yet might not be Mr Ross after all, but only some chance child—a vagrant of the street. Valentine did all that man could do to banish from his face every appearance of knowing what these looks meant, or of being affected by them ; but how hard it is to do this with the certainty that everybody around you knows that you know ! He made a brave stand ; he smiled and bowed to the people he knew, and spoke here and there a cheerful word, restraining his sense of shame, his wounded pride, the horror in his mind, with a strong hand. But his young face had lost its glow of healthful colour, the circles of his eyes seemed somehow expanded, and his nostrils quivered and dilated like those of

a high-bred horse at a moment of excitement. The effect upon his face was curious, giving it a certain elevation of meaning and power—but it was the power of nature at its utmost strain, so quivering with the tension that one pull tighter of the curb, one step further, might burst the bond altogether. The polling had already begun when they reached Castleton, but the voters in the Ross interest flagged—nobody could tell how. Mr Seisin's name was above that of Val when the state of the poll was published. This, everybody said, told for nothing; for, as it was well known, Mr Seisin had not the shadow of a chance. His supporters had been probably polled at once, to strike a bold keynote, and prove that there were still possibilities, even in Eskshire, for the Liberal party. It told for nothing, they all said to each other, surrounding Lord Eskside, who sat somewhat grim and silent, in the committee-room; but the men there assembled, though stanch as partisans could be, undeniably grew anxious as the moments went on. It was impossible there to ignore the attack, which had never been mentioned by any of his family to Valentine, except on the previous night, when he was told of it solemnly. Here it was of course the chief subject of discussion; and though he took no part in the talk, he had to hear it referred to without flinching. "Depend upon it," said Sir John, "it's a sign of weakness; it is an expedient of despair. They know their cause is desperate, and they don't mind what they say." But reassuring as this was, a cold shiver of alarm began to run through the party. One man stole out after another to see what news there was, to send off messengers hither and thither. The county was stanch;—of that there could be no doubt. Nothing would induce the Eskshire men to give their votes to Mr Seisin; but their minds might have been so affected by this sudden assault, coming just at the critical moment when there was no time to contradict it, that, bewildered and uncertain, they might refrain from voting at all.

Twelve o'clock! The business of the election seemed to have come to a pause. One individual now and then came up to the polling-booths. Already a great yellow placard, "What has become of the Tory voters?" had flashed out upon the walls. A dramatic pause fell into the midst of the excitement. The people of Castleton looked on curiously, as if they had been at a play. Even the crowds in the

streets slackened — almost disappeared. When Valentine walked up the High Street to speak to Lady Eskside, who sat trembling and pale at the window of the Duke's Head, looking on, he was taken no more notice of than on the most ordinary occasion. For one thing, a smart shower had come on, and the idlers had taken refuge under the porches of the houses, and at the shop-doors, where they gazed at him calmly, without a cheer, without a salutation. Lady Eskside, looking out of the window, watched all this with an aching heart. It seemed to her that all was over. She could not take her eyes from the impudent placard opposite on the Liberal headquarters—"Seisin, 355 ; Ross, 289." The yellow ribbons seemed to flaunt at her ; her very heart was sick ; and the chillness of mental suffering crept over her old frame. "Oh, Val, my dear, I wish this was over," she said, taking his hand between hers. "Never fear, grandma," he said, smiling at her dimly, as if from the midst of a dream. He scarcely knew what he was saying ; and so far as he was conscious of the words, he did not believe them. The young man gave a glance across at the other window, but Violet was not there, which was a kind of vague consolation to him. He held the old lady's hand, and tried to smile, and talk, and encourage her, without the least idea what he said.

At that moment the tide turned. The impatient little rattle of a small pony-carriage came up the long street, heard rattling over every particular stone all the way up, so great was the stillness of this strange moment of suspense. The pony-carriage drew up before the Duke's Head, and Dr Rintoul, who lived in one of the new villas on Lord Eskside's feus, got out and walked towards the polling-booth. His daughter, who had driven him, stood up—a large woman, bigger than the pony she drove—with a wave of her whip, on which there streamed a blue ribbon. "Good morning, Lady Eskside," cried Miss Rintoul. "We are all Liberals, but we hate a mean advantage, and all blows in the dark. I've driven papa over to vote for Ross for ever, against all your sneaking enemies !" Miss Rintoul was not afraid of the sound of her own voice—she had outlived all such weaknesses. She said out what she had to say roundly, seeing no reason to be ashamed of it, standing up as on a platform, and waving her whip with the blue ribbon. Her vigorous voice caught the capricious ear of the crowd ; for

just at that moment the shower had stopped, the sun shone out, and the bystanders began to burst out from their hiding-places. "Ross for ever!"—two or three caught up the cry. It was echoed with a lusty roar from the Edinburgh road, whence a string of hackney-cabs, and an old coach which had once plied between Lasswade and Princes Street, and bore their names emblazoned on it, came clattering full speed round the corner. "Down with Pringle, and Ross for ever!" cried the Lasswade men, packed like herrings in their cabs. Blue flags streamed from the dusty roofs; familiar faces, hot and breathless, but beaming, looked up at the old lady and her boy. The shout ran down the length of the High Street, and called out the committee-men to their balcony. When Val turned away, moved by the restlessness of excitement, his way down the street was a triumph: the crowd divided to let him pass, cheered him, held out damp hands to be shaken, and strewed his path, so to speak, with smiles. He was received by his committee almost with embraces, with shaking of hands, and general tumult, half-a-dozen speaking together.

"All right, Mr Ross, all right! all right, my lord!" said one eager Castleton supporter. "The Lasswade men have come—Loanhead's on the road—and there's a perfect regiment coming up the water. Hurrah for Ross, and fair play for ever! Pringle will have little to brag of his day's work."

"He'll have got us the best majority we've had yet," cried another; "it was too barefaced, and him the next heir." The room, which had been half empty, began all at once, no one knew how, to surge and overflow with enthusiastic supporters. Val felt himself tossed about on the crest of this wave of triumph. He began to get dizzy with excitement, with the sight of the groups pouring along the street towards the polling-booths, all in his interest, and with the agitation and tumult of talk about him. Long before the close of the poll his victory was secure.

But while the excitement of the crisis thus settled into assurance, another excitement rose in the young man's mind. All round him, loud and low, in every different tone, he heard the name of Pringle identified with the assault which had shaken all the foundations of his life. He had said nothing about its effect upon his mind;—had even postponed realising it, at his grandfather's entreaty, and the still greater

urgency of circumstances, which compelled him to put a bold face on the matter, and show no emotion to the world. But all the while he knew that the stroke, though he had no time to think of it, had struck at his very heart. He had not slept all the previous night ; he had made such a tremendous effort of self-control as his young frame and undisciplined mind were scarcely capable of ; and the reaction was beginning to set in. Every faculty, every feeling, began to concentrate in the sense of injury which he had shut out of his mind by such an effort while necessity required it—of injury, and of that passionate impulsive rage which was the weak point of his character. From the moment when he fully realised who it was that had struck this dastardly blow at him, his blood had begun to boil in every vein. Pringle ! that was the man—his pretended friend, his relation, a man who had smiled upon him, eaten with him, called him by friendly names, sought him out. I cannot tell how it was that Violet, and everything connected with her, disappeared altogether at this crisis from the young man's agitated mind. He never paused to think that it was Vi's father against whom his whole passionate soul rose up in one longing to punish and avenge. She and everything gentle in his life disappeared and was swept away, the burning tide of fury being too strong for them. Before his confused eyes, while the very different scenes of the day were still going on around him, another panorama seemed to be passing, mixed up somehow with the actual events, the central figure in which was always this man, looking like a friend, yet preparing this deadliest sting for him. That burning sense of the intolerable which is in all human affairs the most intolerable of sensations, came upon Val with a force which he seemed helpless to resist. He felt that he could not bear this injury—he could not pass over it, let it go by as if it had not been. His arm tingled to make some stroke. An agitation of haste and anxiety to get through his present business, that he might be free for the other, took hold of him. He went on, doing everything required of him, smiling, shaking hands, speechifying, he could not tell what, answering to the necessities of his position like a man in a dream, and hearing a confused din in his ears of cheers and plaudits, of meaningless talk, congratulations, paeans of victory, through all of which he tried to rush, faster and ever faster, longing to have it over, to get away—to fly at the

throat of his enemy. And yet I don't think that he betrayed himself. He was excited, but what so natural?—and perhaps worn out with his excitement, to the eyes of one or two close observers. "Get him away as soon as you can—he's overdone," Sir John said to the old lord. "Tut," said Lord Eskside, himself feeling ten years younger in the fulness of his triumph, "no fear of Val; his blood is up, and he can stand anything." Thus the triumphant day came to an end.

The carriage stood in front of the Duke's Head, Lady Eskside and Mary Percival having already taken their places in it, awaiting the new Member and his party, who came up the street, a little murmuring crowd, buzzing forth satisfaction, pride, and mutual plaudits. Val was carried along in the midst of it, more silent than any, feeling almost at the end of his forces, and sick with eagerness to get free. It was at this unhappy moment that a party of young men, recently arrived, came down the street, meeting Valentine and his body-guard. The first of these was Sandy Pringle—the son, not the father. He had come straight from Edinburgh to ascertain the result of the election, knowing nothing whatever of all that had happened till he heard his own name in every mouth, denounced, by this time, by both sides alike. Sandy, as was natural, was deeply excited: he would not allow the universal censure. "If my father were here he would disprove it," he had been saying, but vainly. He came straight up in front of Lord Eskside upon the narrow pavement, blocking up the way with his broad shoulders and well-developed form. "Lord Eskside," he cried, "I appeal to you for justice. I hear my father's name in every mouth—"

"Stand aside, sir!" cried Val, in a voice so loud and harsh, and so full of emotion, that it seemed to silence every sound about him. The bystanders felt as one man that something was coming. All the young man's fictitious composure was gone, the veins were swollen on his forehead, his paleness changed into crimson, his eyes flashing fire. Sandy Pringle looked at him with angry surprise.

"I will stand aside when I please," he said—"no sooner. Lord Eskside, my father—"

"Oh, your father!" cried Val. He stepped out from the group with a movement as swift as lightning. A few words were interchanged, too quick, too furious, for any one to

recollect afterwards ; and before any of their friends could interfere,—before, indeed, the little group around could divine what was wrong—young Pringle, who was twice as heavy a man as his opponent, fell suddenly without a word, struck down by one tremendous blow. “Pass on, gentlemen,” cried Valentine, quivering with passion ; “no man shall stop Lord Eskside in the public streets while I am by !”

I must not attempt to describe the tumult which ensued, or how Val was surrounded and forced away by one party, and Sandy, who sprang to his feet with a mixture of amazement and rage which could not be put into words, was caught by another, everybody eager and vigilant as soon as the harm was done. “I am at Mr Pringle’s service, however he chooses and whenever he chooses,” cried Val, half mad with passion, as they hurried him away

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR PRINGLE had prepared his stroke for years ; he had pondered it in his mind ever since he knew of Lord Eskside’s hopes in respect to the election. He had written the letter itself over and over in his mind, getting a kind of secret joy out of it, all the more intense that nobody was in the least aware of this private vengeance of his own. Even now nobody was aware of it, except by conjecture. As it was intended for the gratification of his personal feelings rather than for the advantage of his party, he had taken none of them into his counsel : they were as much taken by surprise as were his opponents ; and when they had time to reflect and to see the state of public feeling, Mr Seisin and his party condemned and repudiated the attack, though for one moment they had hesitated over it, not sure whether a stroke so telling might not be justifiable, seeing that, politically speaking, the means are justified by the end. Finding, however, as was soon apparent, that it brought about no revolution in the feeling of the county, but rather the reverse, the party to which Mr Pringle belonged denounced and repudiated the performance as heartily as could be desired ;

and Mr Seisin himself "begged emphatically to protest against an attack so thoroughly against his principles, and trusted his honourable opponent would not connect himself or his party with any such anonymous slander." This was clearly the *amende honorable* on Mr Seisin's part ; and the Liberals turned as fiercely upon Mr Pringle for disgracing them, as their antagonists did for traducing their candidate. He was given up on all hands. I do not believe, however, that he either knew of, nor cared for this, at the moment at least. Something much more terrible had fallen upon the man—something which threatened him the moment he had let the winged shaft fly from his hand, but which came down with unimaginable force, now when it had flown into the world, never to be recalled. He had brooded over it, prepared it, taking a fearful joy out of the intention, for years ; but the moment it was done, the man was penitent and ashamed. On the morning after its publication he was more completely struck down with horror and shame than even the family he attacked—so much so that he forgot to think of appearances, or to do anything which should divert suspicion from him. He who had taken so prominent a part hitherto did not even go to Castleton on the election day. He gave no vote ; he abandoned his good name and his friends together. Some one of the old divines, in quaint familiarity with the Prince of Darkness, tells his readers, if I remember rightly, how Satan sometimes puts so big a stone into the hands of a sinner that it slays himself. This was what poor Mr Pringle had done. He might have got through a hundred little efforts of malice without much after-suffering, but this tremendous javelin struck himself first, not his enemy, to the ground.

The Hewan was a miserable house during the night previous to the election, after the letter, which was the source of all this trouble, came into it. "This is your writing, Alexander!" his wife had cried, when she read it. She waited for a denial, but none came. It was his writing, then ! She had thought it, but she had hoped to be contradicted. I dare not repeat what this good wife and upright woman said to her husband after so terrible a discovery. I should not like to describe such a punishment. Mrs Pringle fell upon the unfortunate culprit, in all the mingled wrath of his own wife, compromised by his personal disgrace, and Vi's mother, concerned for her child's happiness. "You

have shamed us all ; you have put a stigma on my boys that years will not wear out ; and you have ruined my Violet, and broken her heart ! " she cried, indignant. It was after this scene that poor little Vi, lonely and miserable, stole down through the rain, old Jean bearing her company, to beg Lady Eskside's pardon. No one knew of this forlorn expedition except old Mrs Moffatt, who knew that poor Vi was in trouble without knowing why. When Violet left the house her mother had retired to her room with a headache ; her father had shut himself up in the new dining-room. The house was wretched, and the child still more wretched. No such domestic commotion had ever happened before in the house. Violet had not known what to do. She had her private misery to swell to overbrimming the trouble which her friendly young soul would have felt even in a case less intimately affecting her. She gave up her own happiness without a struggle, or at least so she thought, as she hastened down the rough paths through the woods, with her hood over her bright hair, and old Jean toiling after her with her big umbrella. She thought she gave it up without hope or question. Poor Vi ! for when the old lady, who had always been so kind, made no movement of affection towards her, when she turned away without a sign, Violet felt for the first time all the bitterness of being without hope. She had meant to give Val up, and her happiness and her life—but, alas, poor little Violet ! I fear she had not thought of being taken at her word. In her little breaking heart there had survived an unspoken hope that Lady Eskside would gather her up into her kind old arms, kiss her, forgive her, and make everything again as though this misery had never been. At twenty it is so easy to believe that everything can be made up, if only those who have the power could be persuaded to have the will also. It was not till Lady Eskside turned away that Violet felt that this thing was, and could not be mended. She rushed out again into the rain and night in a real despair, of which her former anguish had only been the similitude. Wretchedly, in a silence which she could scarce keep from breaking with sobs, she fought her way through the rain among the bare trees, her eyes so full of bitter tears that she could see nothing. Ah, what a difference from the day before, when Val was by her side, whom her father had injured, striking at him cruelly in the dark, slandering him before all the world ! "One thing is good,

at least—it is soon over, soon over!" poor Vi said in her heart.

Next day this unhappy family met estranged, saying nothing to each other, and worn out with the tumult of the past night. Mrs Pringle waited, expecting her husband to set off to Castleton for the election all the morning through, but she would not condescend to ask him if he were going. He did not go. Shame had taken hold upon the man. He shut himself up in the room which he had built, and saw no one except at luncheon, when they met and sat down together, making a pretence to eat, without exchanging a word which could be avoided.

"How long is this to last, mamma?" said Violet, as they sat together on the embankment, looking down the vale of Esk, with all its trees beginning to grow green, and the turrets of Rossraig shining in the sun.

"How can I tell?" said Mrs Pringle; "as long as your father chooses, I suppose. God knows what has come over him, Vi. He has done this for his party, destroying all our peace of mind, and now he will not even go to give his vote. I do not know what can have come over him. Sometimes I think it must be illness," said poor Mrs Pringle, drying her eyes. Compunctions were beginning to steal upon her too, and meltings of heart towards the sufferer.

"By this time it must be settled," said Violet, looking down the valley with tears in her eyes which hid it from her, and with quivering lips; "and oh, mamma, if Val has lost!"

"He has not lost,—you may be sure of that," said her mother. "But, Violet, my darling, don't say Val any more. You must make up your mind that *that's* all over, Vi. They would never suffer it—I could not myself in their place."

Violet looked at her mother with her lips quivering more and more. "I know," she said, with an attempt at a smile. Too well she knew. She had not said anything about her visit to Lady Eskside. Why should she? Her heart was too sick and sore to be able to enter into prolonged confidences; and what was the use?

Sandy got home almost as soon as the Eskside party did with their four horses. He had thrown himself free as soon as he could of the friends who had flung themselves upon him to "hinder mischief," as they said. "Mischief? what

mischief?" he cried, fiercely; "do you think I am going to make a fool of myself fighting a duel with Val Ross?" He was too dangerous an antagonist, notwithstanding the humiliation which, taken at unawares, he had sustained, to dispose any one to renew the quarrel on Val's behalf; and he had shaken them off and hastened home, possessed by many painful thoughts. It was not until he had got miles from Castleton on an unfrequented road that he ventured to stop and read the paper which, up to this moment, he had only glanced at. Deeply though he felt the affront he had received, I think the wound this paper gave him was deeper still. He too judged, as everybody did, that it was his father's writing, his father's attempt anonymously and under pretext of serving his party, to give a deadly personal blow to the young man whom he had always looked upon as his own and his son's supplanter. Sandy's sense of humiliation, of bitter pain and discomfiture, grew as he approached home. How was he to meet his father, to meet them all; for what more likely than that mother and sister in the heat of controversy had taken his father's side? Every step he took towards the Hewan made him think less of Val's sin against him and more of his father's, which was a worse sin against him (Sandy) and all his brothers than it was against Val. The time of dinner was approaching when he reached the Hewan, and no one was visible. Sandy went to his room to dress, and I need not say that his mother went to him there and told him her story, and had his in return. They exchanged sentiments as they exchanged confidences; for Mrs Pringle, forgetting her husband's offence, on which she had dwelt so long, was seized with a violent indignation against Val, who had insulted her boy. But Sandy, poor fellow, forgot Val's offence altogether, and forgave him, in horror of the greater offence. Never had there been such a dinner eaten by the Pringle family, who up to this moment had been a model of family union. "I suppose you have heard how things went at Castleton," the father said, not looking at his son. "I have been there," said Sandy, pointedly, "and I am glad to say that Val Ross was returned by the largest majority that has been known since '32." "Glad! why should you be glad?" cried Mr Pringle; and this was all that was said. Afterwards, when he withdrew again into his loneliness, Mrs Pringle's heart failed her. She had never quarrelled with

her husband before, and she could not bear it. She went to the room where he had shut himself up, and after an hour or two emerged again tearful but smiling. During this interval the brother and sister were left alone, and Sandy told Violet his story, over which she wept, poor child, crying, "Oh, dear Sandy!" and "Oh, poor Val!" "I think you think as much of him as you do of me," her brother said, not knowing whether to be offended with Violet, or to take the side of his assailant too.

"Oh, Sandy, have I not reason?" cried poor Vi, hiding in her soft heart the deeper reason which only her mother knew. "Was he not always like another brother to me—and to us all?"

"That's true," said Sandy, softened and thoughtful; "he was always fond of you."

This was balm to poor Vi, who could suffer herself to cry a little when Sandy was so ignorant and so kind. "He was fond of—us all," said Violet; "do you mind how good he was to the children? Never till now was he unkind to any one. I am sure he is like to break his heart already for what he has done."

"He must say so then. He was a hasty beggar always," Sandy admitted, "and it was enough to drive a man out of his wits; but why should he have laid hands on me? What had I done? You are a girl, Vi, you don't understand; but, by Jove! to stand being struck—by another fellow, you know."

"And hadn't he been struck, and far deeper? Oh Sandy, only think—all that about his mother, and about his coming here! I don't think he knew of it, or remembered. And to be exposed to the whole county, everybody, all these great people, and all the poor folk—everybody! Oh, poor Val, poor Val!"

Sandy was half inclined to cry too, he was so miserable. He got up and walked about the room, his mind disturbed between the insult to himself and the far deeper insult which Val had first received.

Violet got up too after a while, and stole her arm softly within his. "What shall you do?" she said, looking up to him with her appealing eyes.

"Oh, Vi, how can I tell?" cried the young man. "I'd like to kick him, and I'd like to go down on my knees to him. What am I to do? Till to-day I would have stood

up for Val Ross against the world. Why did he insult me before everybody? I forgive him; but I know no more what to do than you can tell me. One thing," he said, with a short laugh of disdain, "I certainly shall not make a fool of myself, and fight a duel, which is what I suppose he meant. I am not such a ridiculous idiot as to do that."

"A duel!" cried Violet, with a suppressed scream, holding fast by his arm.

"No, I am not such an idiot as that," said Sandy; "though I suppose that is what he must have meant."

"He did not know what he was saying," said Violet. "Oh, Sandy dear, you are brave enough and strong enough to be able to forgive him. Oh, Sandy, will you forgive him? I should not be quite so miserable to-night if you would promise: forgive him, that he may forgive poor papa."

"Why should you be so miserable, Vi?" said her brother, looking earnestly into her face; but fortunately for poor Violet, her mother here made her appearance, and the conversation was stopped. The girl stole away to her little room soon after—the room with the attic window which commanded the view of Esk and its valley, which had been hers since she was a child. It was a moonlight night, and the sometimes golden turrets of Rossraig shone out silvery from among the clouds of leafless trees. Vi pretended to be asleep when her mother came into her room on her way to her own, feeling unable to bear another word; but after that visitation was over, the girl got up in her restlessness and wrapped herself in her warm dressing-gown, and sat by the window watching the steadfast cloudless shining of that white moon in the great, blue, silent heavens, over the dark and dreamy earth. How different it was from the sunshine, with all its sudden gleams and shadows, its movements of life and mirth, its flutterings and happy changes! The moon was as still as death, and as unchangeable, throwing her paleness over everything. The girl's sad soul played with this fancy in a melancholy which was deep as the night, yet, like the night, not without its charm. She sat thus so long that she lost note of time, too wretched to go to bed,—sleepless, hopeless, as she thought; now and then looking wistfully at the silver turrets, thinking, oh if she could only speak one word to Val! only say good-bye to him, though it must be for ever. Notwithstanding these thoughts, it was

with a pang of fright beyond description that she saw, quite suddenly, a dark figure rising over the dyke on to the little platform upon which the Hewan stood. Violet was so much alarmed that it did not occur to her who it was who thus invaded the safe retirement of the place in the middle of the night. She would have screamed aloud had she not been too much frightened to scream. Was it a ghost? was it a robber? She forgot her misery for the moment in her terror; then suddenly felt her misery flood back upon her heart, changed into a desperate joy. It was no ghost nor robber, but Val, poor Val. He climbed up noiselessly and sat down upon the edge of the dyke, with his face turned to the house—in all that quiet, silent, lifeless world, the only living thing, doing nothing to attract attention, scarcely moving, looking at her window in the moonlight. She watched him for a time, with her heart leaping wildly to her mouth. All was perfectly still, the household asleep, not a stir to be heard anywhere but that of the soft night-wind sighing through the trees. Her heart yearned over her young lover in the pathetic silence of this night-visit, which seemed made without any hope of seeing her, without hope of anything—only, like herself, out of the sick restlessness of misery. She opened her window softly, and put out her head. When he saw this, he rose with a start and came towards her. The night-wind blew softly, the trees rustled, a whisper of sound was in the air, like the breath of invisible spectators standing by.

“Oh, Val, is it you?”

“It is me,” said Val. “I came to look at your window before I went away.”

“Where are you going?” she whispered in alarm.

“Somewhere. I don’t know; I don’t care,” said the lad. “I cannot bear it. How can I face the world any more? I wish I could die and be done with it all; but you can’t die when you please. I wanted to say good-bye to you somehow. Vi, dear Vi, don’t forget me altogether; and yet it would be better that you should forget me,” he added, drearily. Oh, if she had been but near to him to console him! It was hard to hear him speak in this miserable tone, and have no power so much as to touch his hand.

“How can you speak of forgetting?” said poor Vi; “as if I could ever forget! But, Val, I know you ought not to think of me any more.”

"I wish I might not think of anything long," he said. "God help us, Vi! everything seems over. Tell Sandy I am sorry I struck him. I was mad. He can call me a coward if he likes, and say I ran away."

"Oh, Val, Sandy is sorry too; he would ask your pardon too. Val, for pity's sake try and think of us no more; but don't go away—don't go away!" cried Vi.

Another faint sound, as of some one stirring in the house, here caught the ears of both. Val looked up in the moonlight, which shone for a moment upon his face, holding out his hands and waving a farewell to her. "Good-bye, good-bye," his moving lips seemed to say; or was it a tremulous kiss they sent her through the sorrowful sighing night? In another moment he had disappeared as he came. Vi sat trembling and weeping silently at her window, watching him disappear into the darkness—trembling as if with guilt when she heard another window thrown open, and the sound of her mother's voice. "I am sure I heard a step on the gravel," Mrs Pringle said, looking out. But the white moonlight shone so full and broad over the cottage and its surroundings, that it was evident no nocturnal visitor was there. "I suppose it must have been my imagination," she added, drawing in her head, and bolting and barring the window. It was long before Violet dared do the same, or dared to make even so much noise as rise from her chair. She sat there half the night through, crying silently, chilled and miserable. Only two nights before, how happy had she lain down!—happy as a child—far happier than any queen! and now it was all over. Even Val himself saw and acknowledged that it was so;—all over, as if it had been a tale read out of a book; and how soon the longest tale comes to an end!

Violet told her mother next morning of this nocturnal visit. She would rather, had she dared, have told Sandy, and kept it back from her mother, who was too angry in consequence of Val's assault upon her son to do him full justice—but dared not, fearing her brother's questions, to which she could give no answer. And then dead silence—one of those blank intervals of existence which are perhaps the hardest to bear—fell upon the poor little girl at the Hewan. When the rest of the family went back to Edinburgh, she begged to be allowed to stay behind for a day or two. I cannot tell for what reason, for probably Vi would

have been less miserable at home among her brothers and her occupations. But at Vi's age one does not wish to forget one's misery—one prefers to take the full good of it. She secured that advantage, poor child! After the events, which had crowded on each other, came silence and stillness, so complete that they weighed upon her like a positive burden, not a mere negation of movement or sound. The long spring days, bright and cold—the long days of rain, when she stood at the window and watched the showers falling over the valley with all its trees, sometimes crossed by a sunbeam, and gleaming under it, but most frequently falling in a mist of moisture, dull, persistent, untouched by any light. Even the news of the village scarcely reached her, and nearly a week elapsed before Violet heard as a piece of public news that Mr Ross had been obliged to leave home on business—that he had not even been present at the great dinner at Castleton, which was given in honour of his election. But not even Mary Percival came up to the Hewan through the woods in that first week of silence, which almost killed Vi. They were all too angry, too deeply offended, and at the same time too anxious about Val, concerning whom Lady Eskside smiled and told stories of the urgent business which compelled his absence, but of whose whereabouts they knew nothing, and had heard nothing since the night when he went away.

CHAPTER XXX.

ON the evening of the day after the election, Richard Ross, in Florence, received two telegrams,—one from his father, announcing the result of the election, sent off from the nearest telegraphic station, in Lord Eskside's own name, and with full official pomp. The other was from Edinburgh, from "Catherine Ross," asking "Is the boy with you? He has left us, and we don't know where he has gone. Write at once, or come." These two announcements threw the clearest light upon each other to Richard. He said to himself that what he had predicted had happened—that his son had been assailed by the story of his birth, and that in shame

and rage he had fled as *she* did. Valentine had not paid his father that long visit for nothing. The *dilettante* had found out that he was a man after all, with some remnants in him of human feeling. A man's child brings back this consciousness more easily than his parents do, by some strange law of nature which is very hard upon the old. Probably had Richard gone back to Eskside, he would have been impatient of the old house and its unchangeable order before he had been two days there, and as glad as ever to get away. But Valentine had interfered with none of his habits ; he had amused him, he had aroused a spark of paternal pride in his mind, which was so little affected by such emotions ; and when the boy went away he missed him, and wondered at himself for doing so. And he had taken an interest of a much stronger character than he could have believed possible in the election. He said to himself now, that he knew and had always predicted what would happen, and a pang of anxiety sprang up within him, the strangest feeling to make itself felt within the polished bosom of a man of the world. Tut ! he said to himself ; what was he anxious about ? a boy who was not a simple rustic from the country, but a man of Eton and Oxford, "up" to everything. He laughed at his own weakness. That very night he was dining out at a brilliant party, the most brilliant that could be collected in the highest circle of Florence at the time of her last revived and temporary magnificence. He was astonished at himself to think how dull he found it. The ladies were less fair, the talk less witty, the diamonds less bright, than he had ever known them. What was the matter with Richard ? " You look depressed and out of sorts," some one said to him next morning. " Oh no, not I ; it is a bad dinner I had yesterday." A bad dinner ! He trembled after he had said it, wondering if perhaps his questioner would take the trouble to inquire where he dined. But it was not the dinner which was in fault. He felt himself asking himself in the midst of it—where was the boy ? what had become of him ? What might Valentine have done if he had been assailed by something specially hard to bear ? He was uneasy and restless all night, slept badly, and again asked himself, as soon as he woke, where was the boy ? " Confound the boy ! he can take care of himself better than I could," Richard said to himself under his breath ; but all his reasoning did

nothing for him. He was anxious, uneasy, as parents so often are ; his imagination in spite of him strayed into a thousand wonderings ; he had to call himself back, even when in the middle of a despatch, from those ridiculous questionings about Val ; and at last the commotion in his mind became more than he could comfortably bear.

Nor was it only Valentine who had roused the life which had half congealed within his father's veins. The photograph which chance had thrown into his hands had not been without its effect in rousing him. When he murmured *maladetta!* between his closed teeth, he was as much in earnest as a man can be when he looks, disenchanted, and with all the glamour gone out of his middle-aged eyes, upon the fair face, no longer so fair, which had made havoc with his youth. But somehow the knowledge that he had that scrap of paper in his desk affected Richard in a way which no one who knew him could have believed possible. He had no portrait of her—nothing by which he could recall her face ; and this glimpse of her—so unexpected, so changed, and yet so unmistakable—the face of the woman who was her, yet not her—the same creature whom he had married, yet another being of whom he knew absolutely nothing—had moved him as I suppose nothing else connected with her could have done. He would have been as intolerant now of any attempt to recall his affections to her as when Lady Eskside tried, and failed, to rouse him to interest in his wife. Even had any other creature been aware of the existence of the portrait—had any one known that he had kept and secured it, and would take it out now and then, with a half sneer on his face, to look at it, when he was certain no one could disturb him—Richard would have been as hard, as unyielding, as defiant as ever. But the fact that no one knew opened his heart so far. Sometimes he would say to himself with a curious subdued laugh, “Looks as if she had been a lady !” The thought filled him with a strange amusement, a satirical sense of the incongruities of life. She whom it had been impossible to tame into any semblance of quiet, vagrant-born and vagrant-bred, a wild creature of the woods as long as she was in the atmosphere where a lady's demeanour was necessary ; and now, in a sphere where it was not necessary—where it brought remark upon her—facing him with that still look, which (he could not deny) was full of a wild gravity and dignity ;—he

laughed at the strange thought, but the sentient his laugh expressed was not mirthful: it was the only way in which he could embody the grotesque sense of confusion and bewilderment that rose in his mind. Would she bear that same aspect of dignity, he wondered, if he saw her? Would she know him at a glance, as he had recognised her? Did she know Val? The little picture was like a romance to him. It worked upon him as nothing in his life had done for years.

Did she know Val?—how curious was the inquiry!—had she any intentions, any hopes, about the other boy—he whose figure, stooping on the little pier to push off somebody's boat, was all his father knew of him? His father! Can you imagine, dear reader, the strange thrill that went through the man of the world, in spite of himself, when he thought of this "other boy"? The elegant calm of the accomplished diplomatist, who had lived for nothing but the State and society, fine talk and fine people, and pictures and china, for years, was completely disturbed and broken up by this invasion of unusual thought, and something which he tried to persuade himself was simply curiosity and not feeling. He had written at once, as I have said, to his confidential solicitor, bidding him to inquire into all the particulars he had learned from Val, and to ascertain the facts in strictest secrecy, without doing anything to awaken the woman's suspicions, and to keep an eye upon the mother and son, taking care that they did not escape him again, but were always within reach if wanted. When he had done this, he thought that he had done all it was his duty to do. They did not require anything from him—neither help nor supervision. They had sufficed to themselves for so many years, and doubtless could do so still; and all that *he* wanted (he said to himself) was to know where to lay his hand upon them for Val's sake—to be able to prove his complete identity at any moment. For this purpose it was enough to know where the mother was, and to take care that she never again stole out of their ken, either by her wandering tastes or by the final way of death. This was all that was necessary in Val's interest. And yet, after a while, it did not content Richard. He felt an uneasiness take possession of him; not that he wanted anything to say to the woman who had worked him so much harm, or wished to acknowledge and bind to himself the uncultured young tradesman, who was his son also

as well as Val. No instinct of paternity moved him here. "The other boy" could, he was sure, be nothing but a bore to him—a creature whom he must be ashamed of. A girl might have been different,—might have been capable of training ; but a boy who had spent all his youth as, at best, a working man, earning his bread day by day—no, he could not suppose himself to be moved by any inclination towards these unknown persons. He was only anxious to know where they were, to be able to lay his hand upon them when necessary, nothing more. All that he desired was that they should remain unknown in the condition they had chosen, neither troubled by him nor troubling him, only ready to be produced on Val's behalf, should that be needful. What other feeling could he be expected to entertain.

But, reasonable as all this sounded, some disturbance, for which he could not account, had got into Richard Ross's soul. He could not tell what he wanted. Movement he supposed, change, even the bore of giving up the life he preferred, and visiting home, and seeing with his own eyes what had happened and what was happening. He would not like it, he knew, when he was there, but still, perhaps, it would do him good to go. His digestion (he thought) must have got out of order—a certain monotony had crept into his life. That which he possessed seemed less desirable than usual ; that which was out of his reach more attractive. The telegram about Val gave the last touch to his uneasiness. Yes, he thought it would be better to go. He could bring Val to his senses, no doubt, better than anybody else could, and it would please the old people, and the change would be good for his own health. He made up his mind quite suddenly, and concluded all his arrangements in twenty-four hours, and set out for England. But in order to do what he intended quite effectually he made a curious *détour* on the way. He went to the little village on the coast where his children had been born. I think it was the lovely little town of Santa Margherita, on the eastern Riviera, or some other of the little glimpses of Paradise there. The children had been baptised by the English chaplain from Genoa, and he turned aside to get the register of their baptism with a business-like precaution for which he smiled at himself. He felt that he could do this more quietly, with less likelihood of attracting curiosity, in his own person, than if he had done it by letter. He got the copy and attestation properly

drawn out and in full legal form, and carried them away with him, without even examining the packet, intending to hand it over to his father, whose orderly soul would be satisfied. And thus prepared and ready for any emergency, he went home.

He found only his mother at Rossraig. The old lord had gone, very unhappy and anxious, to London, hoping for some news of the boy. He had now been nearly a week absent, and nothing had been heard of him ; and Lady Eskside met her son with worn looks and a miserable excitement, which already seemed to have worn her strength out more than the pressure of years had done. Even in the act of welcoming her son, her eyes and ears were on the alert, watching doors and windows with feverish eagerness. "I know I am foolish," she said, with a wan smile ; "for, indeed, Val is well enough able to take care of himself, as you say. He is not a rustic—no, nor a simpleton, nor one unused to the world. No, Richard, I know : nothing of all that. Of course, his training has just been of the kind to make him able to take care of himself ; and for a young man at his age to be away from home a week is nothing so wonderful. Yes, yes ; you are right. I know you are right, and I am foolish, very foolish ; but I cannot help it, my dear—it is my nature. You can't reason anxiety down. Oh, I wish I could help it ! I know I am unjust to my poor Val."

"Well, mother, boys will be boys, and they must have their swing, you know," said Richard, despising himself for the words without meaning, which were no more satisfactory to himself than to her. "Besides, I suppose he has always been a steady fellow hitherto," he added, "which should make you less anxious now."

"Oh, always, always," she cried, almost with tears ; "no one could be more trustworthy. My poor old lord is very unhappy, Richard ; he is as foolish as me ; because he has always been so good, we think he should continue the same for ever—never step out of the beaten path for a moment, or take his own way ;" and she tried to laugh at her own foolishness, but breaking down in that, was so much nearer crying that she walked to the window instead, and looked out with an eager wistfulness that had become habitual to her, looking if possibly some one at that very moment might be arriving with news.

"Does anybody know ?" he asked.

"We have taken every precaution," said Lady Eskside. "We gave it out he had been called away by you on family business. I drove into Edinburgh myself, and went to the telegraph office on foot, Richard, and gave them the family name—no title, as you would see, that the telegraph people might not know—for how could I tell if they might spread it? I don't think anything is suspected out of doors, but I could not say for the servants. They always find out what is doing. They read it in your face, in the hour you go to bed, in the way you take your dinner. That Margaret Harding knows I am unhappy is plain enough; but I am not sure that she knows what is the cause."

"Oh, you may take that for granted too," said Richard; "they find out all one is thinking. Never mind, mother; everything in this world is like the dew. It dries up and disappears, so that you could not tell where it had been. Now tell me what clue you have, and where you think he is likely to have gone."

"We have no clue at all," said the old lady. "Had he gone to see any of his friends we should have heard of him ere now; and had he gone abroad, Richard, he would have gone to you. That is one of the hardest things of all—we don't know where to look for him. Your father is in London, wandering about."

"Did you ever think of Oxford?" said Richard.

"Oxford?—what would he do in Oxford? He has no friends he is fond of there. His friends were lads of his own standing, who left Oxford when he did. It never occurred to me; but, my dear, if you think it's a likely place, we'll send there at once."

Lady Eskside put out her hand to ring the bell. If Siberia or Egypt had been suggested to her, I think she would have rung the bell all the same, and directed some one at a half-hour's notice to go.

"What are you going to do, mother? do you mean to send Harding to Oxford to look for Val?"

She smiled a forlorn smile as she saw the foolishness of her instinctive movement; and then Richard explained to her that he would go, having some reasons of his own for thinking it possible that Val might have gone to Oxford, as well as some business to do there in his own person. "But you will let no business detain you if you do not find the boy?" Lady Eskside said, and listened with an impatience

she could not conceal while Richard explained that business must be done whatever Valentine might do. "Besides, you don't think that a young man like Valentine—a newly elected member of Parliament, and your grandson—can be lost like a child, mother?" he said, half laughing, though he was not without anxiety too. I am afraid the old lady felt his ease, and gentle way of taking this tremendous calamity, jar upon her; and she was so anxious that he should set out at once to look for her lost child, that Richard was affronted too, and with some reason. He was less annoyed by her evident preference of Val to himself than he had been fifteen years ago; but it still struck him half whimsically, half painfully. He remained all night after his long journey, almost against her will. She could think of nothing but Val; and when he was ready to start next day, all that she said and seemed to think was about her darling. "You will telegraph to me at once, if you hear anything? Oh, my dear, think how hard it is to be left here in the quiet, hearing nothing, not able to do anything, but wait!" she said; and was restless all the morning, and afraid that he would be late for the train. Richard could not help making a few reflections on the subject as he went away. He was not so deeply attached to his son as to tremble for his safety as Lady Eskside did: and he was not so much devoted to his mother as to feel very deeply her abandonment of himself altogether, and substitution of Valentine in his stead. But in his comparative calm he noted and made reflections on the subject more than he could have done had his interest been more deeply engaged. It was a curious psychological inquiry to him;—and at the same time he felt it a little. It gave him an odd prick which he had not expected. "After all," he said to himself, "the Palazzo Graziani is the place for me."

He set out for Oxford about noon. His mother could scarcely forgive him that, because of mere unwillingness to be disturbed a little earlier than usual, he had missed the early train. "Oh," she said to herself, "when would I have been kept from my boy for the sake of an hour's longer lie in the morning!" She was relieved to get him out of the house at last, bearing a hundred messages for Val if he should be found, and under solemn charges to telegraph at once to her the result of his mission—glad, very glad, to get him out of the house, though he was her only son, whom she had not seen for years. I suppose few things could make a man feel

more small than the fact that his mother was absolutely indifferent to him,—could scarcely even see him, indeed, except by the borrowed light of his son. Richard went away smiling to himself over this curious fact, but slightly wounded at the same time, and set off for Oxford with many thoughts in his heart. He was letting himself drift unconsciously to the place in which that woman was. Should he see her? and if he saw her, should he make himself known to her? or what would happen? He could not tell. There was no love, not even the ashes of a dead one, in his heart. What could that love be which Richard Ross once felt for a tramp-girl, without education of any kind—a fair weed without any soul? It had dried up and left no remnant behind. But he was curious, very curious; what had time done, perhaps, for the creature whom *he* had been able to do nothing for? "Looks as if she had been a lady once." These careless words of Val's had influenced his father more than anything more serious. He wanted to know how this strange result had come about.

Lady Eskside watched the carriage roll over the Lasswade bridge, on its way to the railway station; and after it had passed, still sat musing at the high window of the turret, from whence she could see it. She saw people, too far off to be distinguishable, passing the bridge from time to time, and watched them with a feverish anxiety till she could see which way they took—the road to Rossraig, or away on the other side to the village, and to Castleton. She thought no longer of her son, her Richard, who had once been the most important object in the world to her. Her heart went past him, impatiently thinking of another more dear—of her boy who was in danger or trouble somewhere, the child of her heart and her old age. While she still sat thus musing, with a sick heart and longing eyes, at the window, she heard Harding's slow steps, with his creaking boots, come toiling up-stairs to call her. There had been so many false alarms, that she sat still languidly with her hands crossed in her lap, and her eyes still fixed on the bridge, till he came to the door of the turret-room, and it was only when her ear detected something strange in the sound of his voice that she looked round. Harding certainly did not look himself; he had a startled half-scared expression in his eyes, and his rosy cheeks were paled, as with a tint of blue over the pink. "If you please, my lady,"—he began in a tremulous voice.

“What is it, Harding?” She rose up very alert and ready, trembling too, but not showing it, for she had not taken any one into her confidence, nor permitted it to be seen how anxious she was.

“There is a young—gentleman down-stairs, my lady ; wishes to speak to you—if you please.”

“A young gentleman ! who, Harding ?”

“I don’t know, my lady ; leastways, his face it is familiar to me, I won’t deny, but I can’t put a name to it. It’s familiar to me, but I don’t know as I ever saw him before.”

“How can you know him, then ?” said my lady, trying to smile ; “you have perhaps seen a picture in these days when everybody is photographed. And, Harding, what does he want with me ?”

“Very likely your ladyship is right,” said Harding ; “everybody has their photograph, it is true. I’d like to know what your ladyship thinks. I’ve put him in the morning-room to wait.”

“If he is a gentleman, you should have taken him to the library or the drawing-room,” said Lady Eskside, going calmly down-stairs. I wonder if it is any news ? she said to herself, and did not, I think, give any further attention to old Harding’s apparent curiosity about the visitor. What time had she to think about any stranger, except to consider whether he brought her news or not ? and quite likely it was but some tradesman from Edinburgh—some indifferent person. She turned round as she went down-stairs to ask if he had given his name.

“He said his name was Brown ; but your ladyship wouldn’t know it, as he was a stranger to your ladyship,” said Harding. This quickened Lady Eskside’s step. It might then be news after all.

The little morning-room was small and bare, a room in which tradespeople and visitors on business were received. Over the mantelpiece there hung a boyish portrait of Val, an indifferent picture, banished here as not worthy a place elsewhere. When Lady Eskside entered the room, her visitor had his back to her, looking at this picture. He did not hear her come in, and she stood a second, silent, waiting till he should observe her ; but getting impatient, said hastily, “You wanted to see me ?”

“I beg your pardon,” said the young man, turning sharply round. Good God ! who was it ? The old lady fell

back as far as the wall would let her, with a loud cry. She held out her hands, half holding him off, half inviting his approach. "Who are you? who are you?" she cried, her heart leaping to her throat.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said the youth. He did not know whether he ought to have said "my lady," and hesitated. "I hope I have not frightened you. I came to say that Mr Ross——"

Was it possible that Val, her darling, had gone out of her mind in that moment of wonder? She scarcely heard what he said, though they were words which would have raised her to the height of excitement had any one else said them. She came forward to him with the same wild wonder in her eye, with her hands uplifted. "For God's sake, boy, who are you? who are you?" she said.

Richard had gone away from her only an hour before, a middle-aged man for whom her feelings were scarcely those of a mother's impassioned love; yet here Richard stood before her, her true Richard, the boy who had been her adoration and her pride a quarter of a century ago. Her head reeled; the light swam in her eyes; life seemed to turn round with her; and everything became a dream. "For the love of God! who are you?" she cried.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHEN Valentine disappeared in the moonlight from the Hewan, his mind was in a state happily very unusual to youth, but to which youth adds all the additional bitterness of which it is capable. He was not only outraged, wounded to the quick, every comfort and consolation taken from him for the moment, but his heart and imagination had no refuge to fall back upon, no safe shelter which he could feel behind him whatever might happen. Everything he was familiar with and every being he loved was involved in the catastrophe that had overwhelmed him. In other circumstances, had anything equally dreadful befallen him at home, he would have had his young love to fall back upon, and his tender, sympathising Violet, whose soft eyes

would have given a certain sweetness even to misery itself ; or had Violet failed him, he might have had at least the tender peacefulness of the old home, the old people who adored him, and to whom he was all in all. But in this horrible crisis everything seemed gone from him. The very thought of home made his heart sick ; he had been shamed in it, and made a shame to it ; and poor Lord Eskside's kind mistaken assurance, so tenderly and solemnly made, that in his own mind there was not a doubt of Val's identity, had almost broken the poor young fellow's heart. Heaven above ! what must his condition be, when his grandfather, the old lord himself, whose idol he was, had to say this to him ? When the recollection recurred to Val, it was with all the fainting sickness of soul with which a deathblow is received. It was not a deathblow, but in his misery this was how he felt it. And Violet was separated from him, it seemed for ever, by her father's enmity and unprovoked assault ; and if that had not been enough, by his own mad assault upon Sandy, who, he knew well enough, was his friend, and would never have harmed him. This completed, he felt, his isolation and miserable loneliness ; he had nowhere to turn to for relief. Once indeed he thought of his father ; but had not his father prophesied to him how it would be ? and could he go now and tell him all had happened as he prophesied, and yet expect consolation ?

Thus poor Val felt the ground cut from under his feet ; he had nowhere to turn to, no one to fall back upon. For my part, I think this makes all the difference between the bearable and the unbearable in human trouble. This is what clothes in armour of proof a man who has a wife, a woman who has a child. Something to fall back upon, something to turn to, whatever your ill is, to find support, backing, consolation. Poor boy ! he gazed round him with hot eyes, hopeless and unrefreshed, and saw nowhere to go, no one to throw himself on. It was not that he doubted the love of his grandparents, who had never given him a moment's cause to distrust them ; but there it was that his wound had been given him, and he wanted to get away, to get away ! to look at it from a distance and see if perhaps it might be bearable—but found nowhere to go to, no one to receive him. And the kind reader must remember what blood Val had in his veins before he condemns him—wild blood, oftentimes almost more than he could struggle against

even in his calmest moments, and a heart full of chaotic impulses, now fired by misery and left to torment him like a pack of demons. He did not know what to do, nor what he wanted to do ; but something must be done, and at once, for to keep still was impossible. Therefore as movement was the best thing for him at all events, he walked to Edinburgh through the moonlight, through the tranquil country roads, on which he met no one, through still villages where all the world was asleep. Now and then a watchful dog, roused by the passing step, barked at him as he went along, which seemed somehow to give him an additional conviction of being a castaway, abandoned by all the world—but that was all. Deep silence surrounded him, a still, soft night, but chill with a cold that went to his heart ; and the moon was cold and the world slept, and nobody cared what Valentine might do with himself—Val, who had been so loved, so cared for, and who was so sure three days ago that the whole world took an interest in him, and, in its heart, was on his side !

I do not know precisely why he went to Oxford—probably because he was accustomed to go there, and it gave him less trouble to think of that place than of anywhere else when the moment came to decide where he was going—for I don't think it was any conscious recurrence of mind to friendly Dick and his mother. He was too unhappy to remember them. Anyhow he went to Oxford—where he arrived half dead with fatigue and misery. He had not eaten, he had not slept, since Lord Eskside gave him that paper in the library, and he had been subject to all the excitement of the election while in this state. He went to bed when he got to the hotel, to the astonishment of the inn people, for he had not even a bag with him, no change of dress, or any comfort—and spent the night in a confused stupor, full of dreams, which was not sleep. Next morning he got up late, went down to the river side, hardly knowing what he was about, and got into a boat mechanically, and went out upon the river. As it happened, of all days in the year this was Easter Monday, a day when many rude holiday parties are about, and when the Thames is generally avoided by well-informed persons. It was crowded with boats and noisy parties, heavy boatloads, with rowers unfit for the responsibility they had undertaken—the kind of people who cause accidents from one year's end to another. Val did

not think of them, nor, indeed, of anything. I doubt even whether he was capable of thought: his pulse was galloping, his head throbbing, his eyes dull and red, and with an inward look, seeing nothing around.

Unfortunately, as it happened, Dick was not on the wharf at the moment to notice who was going or coming, and was quite unaware of the presence of his young patron. Dick's mother, however, was standing in her little garden, looking out over the wall. She had no one to look for now, but still her eyes kept their wistful habit, and the even flow of the stream and perpetual movement seemed to soothe her. She was standing in her abstracted way, one arm leaning upon the little gate, gazing without seeing much,—not at the familiar Thames, but into the unknown. She came to herself all at once—with a start, which made the gate quiver: came to herself? nay—for herself, poor soul, had not much share in her thoughts then—but came back to consciousness of the one thing which seemed to give life a certain reality for her. All in a moment, as if he had dropped from the skies, she saw Valentine stepping into his boat; how he had come there, where he was going, she could not tell; but there he stood, wavering slightly as he stepped into the light outrigger, swaying it dangerously to one side, in a way very unlike Val. Her heart sprang up in her breast, her whole nature came to life at the sight of him, and at something, she could not tell what, in the look of him—something uncertain, helpless, feeble. Her figure lost its droop, her head its musing attitude. She stood alert, in the intensest eager attention and readiness for everything, watching her boy.

Val paddled out into the stream, poising his long oars, I cannot tell how, in a vague uncertain way, as if he did not well know which end of them was in his grasp. Then he let himself float down past her, feebly steering himself, but doing little more; and then some sudden idea seemed to come to him—or was it rather a cessation of ideas, a trance, a faint? He stopped his boat in the middle of the crowded river, and lay there with long oars poised over the water—wavering, reflected in it like the long dragon-fly wings—his figure bent a little forward, his face, so far as she could see it, blank and without expression. There he came to a dead stop, of all places in the world—in the middle of the stream, in the middle of the crowd—taking no notice of passing boatmen

who shouted to him, "Look ahead!" and had all the trouble in the world to steer their course about him and keep out of his way. A thrill of strong anxiety came into the woman's mind—anxiety such as had never moved her before. Heretofore she had been passive, doing nothing, taking no active part in any one's affairs. This stir of life was such that it set her into sudden energetic movement almost unawares. She went outside her gate, and closed it behind her, watching intently, her heart beating high in her breast, and a sense as of some coming emergency upon her. There he sat in his boat, lying still upon the shining water, the long oars with a faint flutter in them as if held in unsteady hands, not straight and motionless as they ought to be—and crowds of unwary boats, ignorantly managed, stumbling about the stream, boats all ripe and ready for an accident, with people in them shouting, singing, jumbled together. There was a small green eyot, a bundle of waving willows, nothing more, just in front of Valentine's boat, which was a partial shield to him; but what had happened to Val that he lay thus, taking no precaution, with the long oars trembling in his hands?

"Look ahead there! look ahead, sir!" cried the men on the river. Val never moved, never turned to see what it was. What did it matter to him (the watcher thought), a capital swimmer, if anything did happen? How foolish she was to be afraid! Just then a great lumbering boat, with four oars waving out of it in delightful licence and impartiality, like the arms of a cuttlefish, full of holiday folk, came up, visible behind the eyot. There was a jar, a bump, a shout. "It ain't nothing, he swims like a duck," cried some voice near her. She could not tell who spoke; but through the dazzle in her eyes she saw that the long oars and the slim boat had disappeared, and that the holiday party—shouting, struggling about the river—were alone visible. Swim? Yes, no doubt he could swim; but the woman was his mother—his mother! She gave a great cry, and rushed with one spring into the punt that lay moored at the steps immediately in front of her door. She was not like one of you delicate ladies, who, all the same, would have done it too, had your boy been drowning. She knew how to do a great many rough, practical things. She pushed the big boat into the stream, and with her big pole, flying like a mad creature, was under the green willows looking for him before any one else could draw breath.

And it was well for Val, poor boy, that though he did not know it, his mother was by, with divination in her eyes. The best swimmer on the Thames could not have contended with the stupor of fever that was on him. When his boat was upset, rousing him out of a bewildering dream, he gave but one gasp, made one mechanical clutch at something, he knew not what, that was near him, and then was conscious of nothing more. His limbs were like steel, his head like lead. There was no power in him to struggle for his life. The boatmen about who knew him did not stir a step, but sat about in their boats, or watched from the rafts, perfectly easy in their minds about the young athlete, to whom a drench in the Thames was nothing. Only the woman, who was his mother, knew that on that particular day Val would sink like a stone. She was at the spot with the punt before any one knew what she was doing, but not before one and another had asked, calling to each other, "Where is he? He is too long under water. He don't remember it's March, and cold." "He'll get his death of cold," said one old boatman. "Man alive!" cried out another, jumping over the boats that lay drawn up upon the rafts, "out with a boat!—he's drowning. Out with your boat!"

What Val had clutched at was the root of one of the willows. He caught it without knowing, clenched it, and when he sank, sank with his drooping head on the damp soil of the eyot—into the water to his lips, but yet supported and moored, as it were, to life and safety by the desperate grasp he had taken of the willow. There the woman found him when she reached the spot. He had fainted with the shock, and lay there totally helpless, the soft wavelets floating over his dark curls, his face half buried in the soft, damp soil, like a dead man, making no effort to save himself.

She gave a cry which echoed over all the river. People a mile off heard it, and shivered and wondered—a cry of longing and despair. But before even that cry had roused the echoes, several boats had shot forth to her aid. The men did not know what had happened, but something had happened; they came crowding about her, while she, half sunk in the soft slime, dragged up in her arms out of the water the unconscious figure. She had his head on her arm, holding him up, half on land half in water, when they got to her. She was paler than he was, lying there upon her, marble white in his swoon. "Is he dead?" they said, coming up

to her with involuntary reverence. She looked at them piteously, poor soul, and held the inanimate figure closer, dragging, to get him out of the water. Her pale lips gave forth a low moan. No one asked what right this strange woman had to look so, to utter that hopeless cry. No one even said, "He is nothing to her ;" they recognised the anguish which gave her an unspoken, unasked right to him, and to them, and to all they could do. And nothing could be easier than to draw him from the river, to place him in the punt, where she sat down beside him, and with a gesture of command pointed to her house. They took him there without a word. "Carry him in," she said, and went before to show them the room. "Go for a doctor." They obeyed her as they would have obeyed Lady Eskside herself. They thought Val was dead, and so did she. She stood and looked at him, when they rushed away to get help for her, in a misery of impotence and longing beyond all words to say. Oh, could she do nothing for him ! nothing ! She would have given her life for him ; but what is a poor mother's life, or who would accept so easy a ransom ? She could only stand and gaze at him in hopeless, helpless, miserable anguish, and wring her hands. She did not know what to do.

Fortunately, however, the doctor came very speedily, and soon engaged all her powers. He turned away the good fellows who had fetched him, and called the servant from the kitchen. "Quick, quick ! every moment he remains in this state makes it worse for him," said the man, who knew what could be done ; and, though he was kind and pitiful, had no sword on his breast piercing him through and through. Val came back to life after a while, and to semi-consciousness. She had not expected it. She had obeyed the doctor's orders in a stupor, docile but hopeless ; but what a tumult, what a tempest woke and raged in her as she saw life come back ! She kept quiet, poor soul, not daring to say a word ; but her joy worked through her veins like strong wine ; and she felt as if she could scarcely keep standing, scarcely hold her footing and her composure against the rapture that seemed to lift her up, to make a spirit of her. Saved ! saved !—was it possible ? She had borne speechless the passion of her anguish, but it was harder to fight with and keep down the tumult of her joy.

"Come here," said the doctor, speaking in peremptory

tones, as it was natural when addressing a person of her class. "I want to speak to you down-stairs. Sit down. Have you any wine in the house? where do you keep it? Be still, and I'll get it myself. Now take this; what's the matter with you? Did you never see a man nearly drowned before?"

"No," she said, faintly, keeping up her struggle with herself. She wanted to cry out, to laugh, to dance, to shout for joy; but before the man who eyed her so strangely, she had to keep still and quiet. She put the wine aside. "I don't want anything," she said.

"Your pulse is going like a steam-engine," said the doctor; "cry, woman, for God's sake, or let yourself out somehow. What's the matter with you? Can't you speak?—then cry!"

She sank down on her knees; her heart was beating so that it seemed to struggle for an exit from her panting, parched lips. "I think I'm dying—of joy!" she said, almost inaudibly, with a sob and gasp. "Poor creature, that is all you know," said the doctor, shaking his head; "he is not round the corner yet, by a long way. Look here, do you know anything about nursing, or do you often give way like this? On the whole, I had better have him moved at once, and send for a nurse."

"A nurse!" she said, stumbling up to her feet.

"Yes, my good woman. You are too excitable, I can see, to look after him. There's something the matter with him. I can't tell what it is till I see him again. Who is he? but how should you know? He had better go to the hospital, where he can be well looked to——"

"Sir," she said, eagerly, "I'm myself now. I am not one to get excited. I thought he was dead; and you brought him back; God bless you! He has been as good as an angel to my boy. I'll nurse him night and day and never give way. Let him stay here."

"You are not strong enough; you'll get ill yourself," said the doctor. "Then you know who he is? Be sure you write to his friends at once. But he'd much better go to the hospital; you'll get ill too——"

"No, no," she said; "no, no. I never was ill. It was I who got him out of the water. I'm strong; look, doctor, what an arm I have. I can lift him if it's wanted. Let him stay; oh, let him stay!"

"Your arm is all very well, but your pulse is a different thing," said the doctor. "If you go and fret and excite yourself, I'll have him off in an hour. Well, then, you can try. Come and let us see how he is getting on now."

"They are as like as two peas," he said to himself, as he went away. "He's somebody's illegitimate son, and this is his aunt, or his sister, or something, and he don't know. God bless us, what a world it is! but I'd like to know which he's going to have, that I may settle what to do."

CHAPTER XXXII.

I AM afraid I cannot tell any one "which" it was that poor Val had, not having any medical knowledge. He was very ill, and lay there for the week during which Dick was absent on his master's affairs, knowing nobody, often delirious, never himself, unable to send any message, or even to think of those he had left behind, who knew nothing of him. He talked of them, raved about them when his mind wandered, sometimes saying things which conveyed some intelligence to the mind of the anxious woman who watched over him, and often uttering phrases which she listened to eagerly, but which were all blank and dark to her. Poor soul! how she watched, how she strained her ear for every word he said. Her own, thus, once more; thus at last in her hands, with none to come between them; dependent on her—receiving from her the tendance of weary days and sleepless nights. Receiving from her, not she from him—eating her bread even, so to speak, though he could eat nothing—living under her roof—dependent on her, as a son should be on a mother. I cannot describe the forlorn sweetness there was to her in this snatch of nature, this sudden, unexpected, impossible crisis which, for the time, gave her her son. I do not know if it ever occurred to her mind that the others who had a right to him might be wondering what had become of their boy. Even now her mind was not sufficiently developed to dwell upon this. She thought only that she had him—she, and no other. She closed her doors, and answered all questions sparingly, and admitted nobody she

could help ; for what had anybody to do with him but she ? When the doctor asked if she had written to his friends, she nodded her head or said "Yes, yes," impatiently. His friends ! who were they in comparison to his mother ? They had had him all his life—she had him for so short a time, so very, very short a time !—why should any one come and interfere ? She could get him everything he wanted, could give up all her time to watch him and nurse him. Once she said, when the doctor pressed her, "I have let his mother know ;" and he was satisfied with the reply. "If his mother knows, of course it is all right," he said. "Oh yes, yes," she cried, "his mother knows ;" and what more was necessary ? She had not the faintest intention of revealing herself to him afterwards, of taking the advantage of all she was doing for him. No ! it seemed to her that she could die easier than say to Val, "I am your mother ;" a subtle instinct in her—delicacy of perception communicated by love alone—made her feel that Val would receive the news with no delight—that to be made aware that she was his mother would be no joy to him ; and she would have died rather than betray herself. But to have him there, unconscious as he was, "wandering in his mind," not knowing her, or any one—but yet with her as if he had been a baby again, dependent on her, receiving everything from her ! No words can say what this was. She passed the time in a strange trance of exquisite mingled pleasure and pain ; suffering now and then to see him ill, to feel that he did not know her, and if he knew her, would not care for her ; suffering, too, from the sleepless nights to which she was totally unaccustomed, and the close confinement to one room, though scarcely realising what it was that made her head so giddy and her sensations so unusual ; but all the time and through all the suffering rapt in a haze of deep enjoyment—a happiness sacred and unintelligible, with which no one could intermeddle ; which no one even knew or could understand but herself. She had no fear for Valentine's life ; though the doctor looked very grave, it did not affect her ; and though her brain was keen and clear to understand the instructions he gave, and to follow them with pertinacious, unvarying, almost unreasoning exactitude, she did not study his looks, or ask with brooding anxiety his opinion, as most other women in her circumstances would have done. She never asked his opinion, indeed, at all. She was merely anxious,

not at all afraid ; or if she was afraid, it was rather of her patient getting well than dying. The doctor, who was the only one who beheld this strange sickbed, was more puzzled than tongue could tell. What did the woman mean ? she was utterly devoted to the sick man—devoted to him as only love can be ; but she was not anxious, which love always is. It was a puzzle which he could not understand.

In a week Dick came back. He had been away on his master's business, being now a trusted and confidential servant, with the management of everything in his hands. It was Easter week, too, and his business had been combined with a short holiday for himself. His mother was not in the habit of writing to him, though she did, in some small degree at least, possess the accomplishment of writing—so that he came home, utterly ignorant of what had happened, on one of those chilly March evenings when the light lengthens and the cold strengthens, according to the proverb. Dick was tired, and the landscape, though it was home, looked somewhat dreary to him as he arrived ; the river was swollen, and muddy, and rapid ; the east wind blanching colour and beauty out of everything ; a pale sunset just over, and a sul- len twilight settling down, tinting with deep shadows and ghastly white gleams of light the cold water. He shivered in spite of himself. The door was not standing open as usual, nor was there any light in the little parlour. He had to stand and knock, and then, when no one answered, went round to the back door (which was his usual entrance, though he had chosen the other way to-night) to get in. The kitchen was vacant, the maid having gone to the doctor's for poor Val's medicine. Dick went into the parlour, and found it dreary and deserted, looking as if no one had been there for months. Finally, he went up-stairs, and found his mother at the door of a bedroom coming to meet him. "I thought it must be you," she said, "but I could not leave him." "Leave him ? Leave whom, mother ? what do you mean ?" he said, bewildered. "Hush, hush," she cried, looking back anxiously into the room she had just left ; then she came out closing the door softly after her. "Come in here," she said, opening the next door, which was that of his own room. "I can speak to you here ; and if he stirs I'll hear him." Dick followed her with the utmost astonishment, not knowing what his mother meant, or if she had gone out of her wits. But when he heard that it was Mr Ross who

lay there ill, and that his mother had saved his young patron's life, and was now nursing him, with an absorbing devotion that made her forget everything else, Dick's mind was filled with a strange tumult of feeling. He showed his mother nothing but his satisfaction to be able to do something for Mr Ross, and anxiety that he should have everything he required ; but in his heart there was a mixture of other sentiments. He had not lost in the least his own devotion to the young man to whom (he always felt) he owed all his good fortune ; but there was something in his mother's tremulous impassioned devotion to Valentine that had disturbed his mind often, and her looks now, engrossed altogether in her patient, thinking of nothing else, not even of Dick's comfort, though she knew he was to return to-day, affected him, he could scarcely tell how. When he had heard all the story, he laid his hand kindly on her shoulder, looking at her. " You are wearing yourself out," he said ; " you are making yourself ill. But it's all right ; to be sure, when he was taken ill like this, he could go nowhere but here."

" Nowhere," she said with fervour. " Here it's natural ; but never mind me, boy, I'm happy. I want nothing different. It's what I like best."

" I'll just step in and look at him, mother."

" Not now," she said quickly, with an instinct of jealous reserve. She did not want any one to interfere—not even her boy. Then she added—" He's sleeping. You might wake him if he heard another step on the floor. Go and get your supper, Dick ; you're tired—and maybe after, if he wakes up—"

" Is there any supper for me ?" said Dick, half laughing, but with a momentary sensation of bitterness. He felt ashamed of it the moment after. " Go in, go in to him, mother dear," he said. " You're in the right of it. I'll go and get my supper ; and after that, if he wakes I'll see him —only don't wear yourself out."

" I do nothing but sit by him—that's all ; doing nothing, how could I wear myself out ?" she said. " But oh, I'm glad you're home, Dick ; very glad you're home !"

" Are you, mother ?" Dick said, with a vague smile, half gratified, half sceptical. Perhaps she did not hear him, for she was already in Val's room, watching his breathing. Dick went down-stairs with the smile still upon his face, deter-

mined to make the best of it—for after all Mr Ross had the best right to everything that was in the house, since, but for him, that house would never have belonged to Dick at all. He called the maid, who had come back, to get him his supper, and stepped outside while it was getting ready, to take counsel of the river and the skies, as he had done so often. It was now almost dark, and the river gleamed half sullen, under skies which were white and black, but showed no warmer tinge of colour. Heavy clouds careered over the blanched and watery firmament—a dreary wind sighed in the willows on the eyot. They did not give cheery counsel, that river and those trees. But Dick soon shook off this painful jealousy, which was not congenial to his nature. What so natural, after all, as that she should give her whole mind to the sufferer she was nursing, even at the risk of momentarily neglecting her son, who was quite well, and could shift for himself? Dick laughed at his own foolishness, and felt ashamed of himself that he could have any other feeling in his mind but pity and interest. He stole up, after his meal, to look into the sickroom, and then the tenderest compassion took possession of him. Val was lying awake with his eyes open but seeing nothing—noticing no one. Dick had never seen him otherwise than in the full flush of strength and health. A pang of terror and love took possession of him. He thought of all Val had done for him, since they met, boys, on the river at Eton, generously exaggerating all his boy-patron's goodness, and putting his own out of sight. The tears came to his eyes. He asked himself with awe, and a pang of sudden pain and terror, could Valentine be going to die? His mother sat quite motionless by the bedside, with her eyes fixed on the patient. There was in her face no shadow of the cloud which Dick felt to be hanging over the room, but only a curious dim beatitude—happiness in being there—which the young man divined but could not understand.

Dick stole down again quietly to the little parlour, where his lamp gave a more cheerful light to think by than the eerie river. It would be absurd were I to deny that his mind had been troubled by many painful and anxious thoughts touching the connection of his mother with the Rosses. He thought he had come to a solution of it at last. In his class, as I have already said, people accept with comparative calm many things which in higher regions would be

considered very terrible. Dick had made up his mind, after many thoughts, to a conclusion such as would have horrified and driven desperate a man differently brought up. He concluded that most likely Val's father was his own father—that his mother had been very young, beautiful, and easily deceived, and that he himself was the son of this unknown "gentleman." Dick was not ashamed of the supposed paternity. It had given him a pang when he thought it out at first; but to a lad who has been born a tramp, things show differently, and have other aspects from that which they bear to the rest of the world. Putting feeling aside, this was what he thought the most probable solution of the mystery; and Val, she knew, was this man's son, and therefore he had a fascination for her. Probably, Dick thought, with a little pang, Val was like his father, and reminded her of him; and it did wound the good fellow to think that his mother could forget and set aside himself for the stranger who was nothing to her, who merely reminded her of a lover she had not seen for years and years. When he thought of his own problematical relationship to Valentine, his heart softened immensely. To think that it was to his brother he owed so much kindness—a brother who had no suspicion of the relationship, but was good to him out of pure generosity of heart and subtle influence of nature, was a very affecting idea, and brought a thrill to his breast when it came into his mind.

These were the conclusions he had hammered out by hard thinking from the few and very misty facts he knew. Some connection there clearly was, and this seemed so much the most likely explanation. Dick thought no worse of his mother for it; he knew her spotless life as long as he could remember—a life remarkable, even extraordinary, in her class—and his heart swelled with pity and tenderness at thought of all she must have come through. He had too much natural delicacy to ask her any questions on such a subject; but since he had (as he thought) found out, or rather divined this secret, it had seemed to account for many peculiarities in her. It explained everything that wanted explanation—her extraordinary interest in Val, her fear of encountering the lady who had been with him, her strange lingerings of manner and look that did not belong to her class. Dick thought this all over again, as he sat in the little parlour gazing steadily into the lamp; and, with a

strange emotion in which pain, and wonder, and pity, and the tenderest sympathy, were all mingled together, tried to make himself master of the position. His lip quivered as he realised that in reality it might be his brother, his father's son, who lay unconscious in the little room up-stairs. No doubt Val was like his father—no doubt he recalled to the woman, who had once been proud (who could doubt?) of being loved by a “gentleman,” the handsome, noble young deceiver who had betrayed her. But Dick did not use such hard words ; he did not think of any betrayal in the case. He knew how tramp-girls are brought up, and only pitied, did not blame, or even defend, his mother. It seemed to him natural enough ; and Val no doubt recalled his handsome father as homely Dick never did and never could do. Poor Dick ! if there was a little pang in this, it was merely instinctive and momentary. The thought that Val might be—nay, almost certainly was—his father's son, half his brother, melted his heart entirely. He would have sat up all night, though he was tired, if his mother had permitted him. His brother ! and in his ignorance, in his youthful kind-heartedness, how good he had been ! They had taken a fancy to each other the moment they set eyes upon each other, Dick remembered ; and no wonder if they were brothers, though they did not know. The good fellow overcame every less tender feeling, and felt himself Val's vassal and born retainer when he thought of all that had come and gone between them. He scarcely slept all night, making noiseless pilgrimages back and forward to the sick-room, feeling, unused as he was to illness, as if some change might be taking place for better or worse at any moment ; and though he had as yet no real clue to the devotion with which his mother watched the sufferer, he shared it instinctively, and felt all at once as if the central point of the universe was in that uneasy bed, and there was nothing in the world to be thought of but Val.

“Mother, you've sent word to—his friends ?” Dick had some feeling he could not explain which prevented him from saying “his father.” This was early next morning, when she had come out to say that Val was asleep, and had spent a better night.

She looked at him with a look which was almost an entreaty, and shook her head. “No—don't be vexed, Dick ; I'm bad at writing—and besides, I didn't want no one to come.”

"But they must be anxious, mother. Think! if it had been yourself; and you know who they are. If it wasn't far off in the north, I'd go."

"Ah," she said, with a gasping, long-drawn breath—"If it must be done, that's the way, Dick. I'm bad at writing, and a letter would frighten 'em, as you say."

"I didn't say a letter would frighten them. Mother, I can write well enough. It's Lord Eskside—I recollect the name. Tell me where, and I'll write to-day."

"No," she said, "no; a letter tells so little—and oh! I don't want 'em to come here. There's things I can't tell you, boy—old things—things past and done with. You've always been a good son, the best of sons to me——"

"And I'll do anything now, mother dear," said poor Dick, moved almost to tears by the entreaty in her face, and putting his arm round her to support her; "I'll do anything now to give you a bit of ease in your mind. You've been a good mother if I've been a good son, and never taught me but what was good and showed me an example. I'll do whatever you would like best, mother dear."

He said this, good fellow, to show that he found no fault with her if it was shame that kept her from speaking to him more openly. But she who had no shame upon her, no burden of conscious wrong, did not catch this subtle meaning. She was not clear enough in her mind to catch hidden meanings at any time. She took him simply at his word.

"Dick," she said softly, entreating still, "he's better—he'll get well—why shouldn't he get well? he's young and strong, the same age as you are—a bit of an illness is nothing when you're young. He'll get well fast enough; and then," she said, with a sigh, "he'll go and tell his people himself. What is the use of troubling you and me?"

Dick shook his head. "They must be told, mother," he said. "I'll write; or if you like, I'll go."

She gave a long weary sigh. She was reluctant, he thought, to have any communication with those unknown people, Val's father, and perhaps his mother, some great lady who would have no pity for the woman thus strangely thrown in her son's path. This was quite natural, too, and Dick, in his tender sympathy with her, entered into the feeling. His tenderness and compassion made a poet of him; he seemed to see every shade of emotion in her disturbed soul.

"Mother, dear," he said again, still more gently, "you don't want to have aught to do with them? I can understand. Tell me where it is and I'll go. The master will let me go easy. We're not busy yet. I'll see the doctor, and go off directly; for whether you like it or not, it's their right, and they ought to know."

"Well, well," she said, after a pause, "if it must be, it must be. I've never gone against you, Dick, and I won't now; and maybe my head's dazed a bit with all the watching. It makes you stupid like."

"You'll be ill yourself, mother, if you don't mind."

"And if I was!" she cried. "If they take him, what does it matter? and they're sure to take him. Dick, it's like taking the heart out of my bosom. But go, if you will go."

"I must go, mother," he said, sorrowfully. This passion was strange to him—hurt him even in spite of himself. Because Val was like his father! The depth of the passionate interest she had in him seemed so disproportionate to the cause.

But when Dick saw the doctor, he was more and more determined to go. The doctor told him that in another week the crisis of the fever might come—one week had passed without any change, and the sufferer was embarked upon the dark uncertain tideway of another, which might be prolonged into another still; but this no one could tell. "I thought your mother had let his friends know—she told me so," he said. "They ought to be made aware of the state he is in,—they ought to be here before the week is out, when the crisis may come."

"But you don't think badly of him, doctor?" said Dick, with tears in his eyes. The mother had never asked so much, the doctor reflected; and he felt for the young man who felt so warmly, and was interested in the whole curious mysterious business, he could scarcely tell why.

"Your mother is a capital nurse," he said, assuming a confidence he scarcely felt, "and please God, he'll pull through."

"Oh, thank you, doctor!" cried honest Dick, drying his eyes, and feeling, as do all simple souls, that it was the doctor who had done it, and that this vague assurance was very sure. He went to see Valentine after, who, he thought, gave him a kind of wan smile, and looked as if he knew

him, which Dick interpreted, knowing nothing about it, to be a capital sign ; and then he extorted from his mother directions for his journey. Reluctantly she told him where to go.

"Oh, Dick," she said, "you'll do it, whether I will or not—and there's things will come of it that you don't think of, and that I don't want to think of ; but don't you name me, boy, nor let 'em know about me. Say your mother—I'm just your mother, that's all. And if they come, I'll not see 'em, Dick. No, I'm not going away ; don't look scared at me. I haven't it in me now to go away."

"Take care of yourself, mother," he said ; "don't watch too long, nor neglect your food. I'll not be long gone ; and *I'll* take care of you whoever comes ; you needn't be afraid."

She shook her head, and followed him with mournful eyes. She did not know what she feared, nor what any one could do to her ; but yet in her ignorance she was afraid. And Dick went away still more ignorant, determined to keep her secret, but feeling in his superior knowledge of the world that it was a secret which no one would care to penetrate. "Gentlemen" seldom try, he knew, to find out a woman thus abandoned, or to burden themselves with her, or any others that might belong to her. He smiled even at the idea. "They"—and Dick did not even know who they were—would think of Val only, he felt sure, and inquire no further. He was still more completely set at rest when he discovered that it was Val's grandmother he was going to see—the old lady who had sent him a present when he was a boy, by Valentine's hands. Dick somehow had no notion that this old lady was in any way connected with himself, even assuming, as he did, that his own divinations were true. She was a stranger, and he went quite calmly into her presence, not doubting anything that might befall him there.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RICHARD Ross left Lasswade as Dick Brown entered it, totally unconscious of him or his errand. They passed each other on the bridge,—the father in the carriage, with his servant on the box, and a hundred delicate comforts about him ; the son trudging along the muddy road, somewhat tired from jolting all night in a third-class carriage, but refreshed by the “good wash” which, almost more than his breakfast, had set him up again to encounter strangers. He was well dressed, in something of the same mode as Val, whose coats he had worn when he was a lad, and whom he unconsciously copied ; and though there was a something about him which indicated his lower position, or rather an absence of something which externally marks “a gentleman,” his open countenance and candid straightforward look gave the merest stranger who looked at him a confidence in Dick, and conferred upon him a distinction of his own. Richard Ross, however, did not so much as notice the young man as he drove to the railway. He was not anxious about Val in the sense in which his mother was anxious ; but his mind was strangely disturbed and jumbled—turned upside down, so to speak. All the common conditions of life had changed for him ;—his repose of twenty years was broken, and his thoughts sent back upon the early beginning of his career, when he was so different a man. To be driven back at forty-five to the thoughts and feelings of twenty-five, how strange it is !—and stranger to some men than to others. To those who have lived but little in this long stretch of existence the return costs less ; but Richard Ross had not changed by the action of years only—he was another man ; everything in him was altered. And yet he was going back, as it were, to twenty-five, to look at the passion and folly and infatuation of that period of his existence ; but with the interval so clearly marked, not only in himself, but in all the others concerned.

Richard was not old, nor did he feel old : in himself he was conscious, not of decay, but of progress. He looked back upon himself at that early age, not with envy, as so many men of the world do, but with a wondering contempt.

What a fool he had been ! Was it possible that he could ever have been such a fool ? Or must it not rather have been some brother, some cousin, some other, not himself, who had been such an idiot ?—some visionary man, whose faults somehow had fallen upon *his* shoulders ? This was the feeling in his mind, though, of course, he knew very well that it was an absurd feeling. And then, with a curious wonder and bewildering sense of suppressed agitation, he remembered that he was going to see *her*. Should he know her after three-and-twenty years ?—he had recognised her picture, which was strange enough ;—and would she know him ? And must they meet, and what would they say to each other ? There had never been very much to say, for she was incapable of what he called conversation ; and, except words of fondness and attempts at instruction, it had been impossible for him, a cultivated and fastidious man, to have any real intercourse with the wild creature of the woods whom he never even succeeded in taming. What should he find to say to her now, or she to him ? The inquiry thrilled him strangely, giving him that bewildering sense of unreality which mixes so deeply in all human emotion. His brain seemed to turn round when he thought of this possible interview. Was she a real being at all, or was he real who was thinking ? Had that past ever been ? Was it not an imagination, a dream ? Ah ! it does not even require such a long interval as twenty years to bring this strange giddiness on the soul. That which we have lost, did we ever have it ?—the happiness, the life, the other who made life and happiness ? I know some houses now, occupied by strange people, whose very names I can't tell you, where yet I feel my own old life must be in full possession of the familiar place, while this dim ghost of me outside asks, Did it ever exist at all ? Richard felt this all the more strongly that he was not an imaginative man by nature. He felt his head swim and the world go round with him, and would not believe that the young fool who had borne his name three-and-twenty years before, was or could have been *him*. But yet he was going to see *her*, the other dream, in whom there was not, nor ever had been, any reality. On the whole, instead of perplexing himself with such thoughts it is better for a man to read in the railway, if he can manage it, even at the risk of hurting his eyes, which require to be *ménagés* at forty-five ; or if that will not do, to close

his eyes and doze, which is perhaps, where it is practicable, the best way of all.

He got to Oxford the next day in the afternoon—another pale, somewhat dreary afternoon of March, typical day of a reluctant spring, with dust in the streets, and east wind spreading a universal grey around, ruffling the river into pale lines of livid light and gloomy shade, and pinching all the green buds spitefully back to winter again. Heavy clouds were rolling over the heavens when he made his way down to the wharf. His old Oxford recollections and Val's indications guided him. He knew the boating wharf of old, though he had never himself been aquatic in his tastes. And there was the little house with its narrow strip of garden towards the river, in which a few sickly primroses were trying to flower. No one had thought of the garden since Val's accident, and already it had a neglected look. "Who lives there?" he asked of a bargeman who was lounging by. "It's Brown's, as is head man at Styles's," was the answer. "Head man at Styles's! I thought a woman lived there," said Richard. Then he suddenly recollected himself. "I had forgotten the boy," he added, under his breath. How strange it was! and this was his son too—his son as well as Val! But, to tell the truth, for the moment he had forgotten the boys, the known and the unknown. He had forgotten that Val was lost, and that he had come here in search of him. He was only conscious, in a strange suppressed haze of excitement, that probably she was within these walls—she—the woman of whom he had said *maladetta*; of whom Val had said that she looked as if she had been a lady. This strange notion made him laugh within himself even now.

It was about five in the afternoon, still good daylight, though the day was a dim one. The maid, who was but a maid-of-all-work, and no better than her kind, had taken advantage of the entire absence of supervision, and was out somewhere, leaving the garden-gate and front-door both open. Richard went up to the door with a certain hesitation, almost diffidence, and knocked softly. He did not want to have any one come, and it was a relief to him when a sufficient interval had elapsed without any response, to justify him, as he thought, in going into the house. Then he stepped across the threshold, casting a glance behind to see if any one outside observed him; and seeing no one, he went in—

first to the little parlour, which had been "cleaned up," fortunately, that morning. It was a strange little room, as I have already said, with tokens in it of instinctive good taste struggling against circumstances. Richard closed the door behind him, and looked round it with a curious irregularity in his heart's beats. He sat down, somehow not feeling equal to anything more, and gazed at those little familiar evidences of the kind of being who had been living here. It was, in reality, Dick who had left his traces all about, but Richard Ross knew nothing about Dick, and had at the present moment very little curiosity as to that unknown and unrealised person. He thought only of *her* : somehow Val's description, at which he had laughed within himself so often, and at which still he tried to laugh feebly, seemed less impossible here. A lady might have lived within these four walls, at the little window which looked out upon the river. The arrangements of the room—its books (which no one read), its pretty carvings and nicknacks (for which Dick alone was responsible)—fitted into the conventional idea of a poor gentlewoman's tastes, which even Richard, though he ought to have known better, had received into his mind. The embroidered shawl which covered the little table caught his eye as it had caught his mother's—he, too, remembered it ; and that undoubted sign of her made his heart beat loudly once more.

He seemed to be all alone in the solitary house—there was not a sound : he had come in and taken possession, and nobody offered to interfere with him. After a little time, however, he began to realise that the position was rather a strange one ; and recovering himself from the curious spell under which he had fallen, he opened the door softly and listened. Then it seemed to him that he heard some faint stir up-stairs. Accordingly he went up the narrow winding staircase, feeling somehow that in this place he could go where he would, that it was not the house of a stranger. He went up, wondering at himself, half bold, half hesitating, and opened the first door he came to. It was the room in which Valentine lay sick—his boy whom he sought. Richard opened the door softly. Everything was very still in it. The patient slept ; the watcher, poor soul, in her exhaustion, perhaps was dozing by him, lulled by the profound quiet ; or else her brain was confused by the long nursing, and was not easily roused except by the patient, whose lightest move-

ment always awakened her attention. And the light was dim, the blind drawn down, every possibility of disturbance shut out. Richard stood like one spellbound, and looked at them. His heart gave a wild leap, and then, he thought, stood still. He recognised Val in a moment, and so perhaps had some anxiety set at rest ; but indeed I doubt whether, in the strange excitement in which he found himself, anxiety for Val told for much. She sat by the bedside in a large old-fashioned chair, high-backed and square-elbowed, which made a frame to her figure. Her eyes were closed, but the intent look in her face, which gave it an interest even to the mere passer-by, was there in a softened form, giving a pure and still gravity, almost noble, to its fine lines ; the hair was smoothed off her forehead ; the white kerchief, which was her usual head-dress, tied loosely about her head ; her hands, glimmering white in the partial darkness, crossed upon her lap. Richard stood still, not daring to breathe, yet catching his breath and hearing his heart beat in spite of himself, afraid to disturb her, yet wondering what she would say to him, how she would look at him when she was roused, as she must be. He was much and strangely agitated ; but the reader must not suppose that it was any wild renewal of old love, any passion, or even the agitation of longing and tenderness, which so moved him. He was curious beyond anything he could say—troubled by the sight of her, strangely eager to know what kind of being this was. She was another from the girl he had known, though the same. She of time past had been a wild thing out of the woods, not much above the birds or other woodland creatures. All her humanity, all her development of mind and heart, had come since then ; and of this human soul, this developed being, he knew nothing, absolutely nothing ; and a thirst came upon him to find out, the intensest curiosity to know, what manner of woman she was.

All at once she opened her eyes and saw him ; but did not start or cry, for, waking or sleeping, Valentine was her first object, and she would not have disturbed him had all heaven and earth melted and given way round about her. She opened her eyes and saw a man looking at her. She raised her head, and knew who it was. The blood rushed back to her heart in a sudden flood, making it beat hard and loud against her side, taking away her breath ; but she did nothing more than rise softly to her feet and look at him. Yes,

it was he. She knew him, as he had known her, at once. She had expected him. Without any knowledge where he was, or how he could hear, she had yet felt sure that he must come. And therefore she was scarcely surprised ; she had the advantage of him so far. She knew him, though to him she was an unknown creature—knew him ignorantly, not having been able to form any judgment of his character ; yet had as much acquaintance with him as her mind was capable of ; while he had no acquaintance with her. She rose up to meet him, and stood wistful, humble, yet with something which looked like pride in her erect figure, and that face which had changed so strangely since he knew it. They stood on either side of the bed upon which their son was lying, scrutinising each other in that strange pathetic gaze. Were there things to be repented of, even in her dim soul ?—I cannot tell. She did not think of judging herself. What she felt was that he was here, that she was in his power, and all that was hers ; that she was not strong enough to resist him, whatever he might do ; that the known and actual had come to an end for her, and all the future was dark in his hands. A dim anguish of fear and impotence came over her. He might send her away from the boy ; he might change her life all at once as by the waving of a wand. She looked at him piteously, putting her hands together unawares ; but while she was thus startled into painful life, plunged into the anxious disquietude of ignorance, roused to fear and uncertainty, not knowing what was to be done with her, she was at the same time incapacitated from any evidence of emotion, silenced, kept still, though her heart beat so ; speechless, though the helpless cry of appeal was on her lips—because she would not wake Val, who was sleeping, and, whatever she might be capable of otherwise, could not, would not disturb the weary rest of the boy.

At length he waved his hand to her impatiently, calling her to follow him out of the room. He did not know what to say to her. Words had gone from him too, though from other reasons ; but he could not stand there, however bewildering were his feelings, looking at this woman, who was so familiar to him and so unknown. She followed him noiselessly, not resisting, and they stood together on the narrow landing outside, close to each other, her dress almost touching him, her quick breath crossing his. What were they to say to each other ? She was not capable of embr-

rassment in the simplicity of her emotions. But Richard standing by her, man of the world as he was, was totally helpless in this emergency. His gaze faltered ; he turned his eyes from her ; he trembled, though only he himself was conscious of it. To be so close to her affected him with a hundred complicated feelings. What could he say ? Faltering, his lips scarcely able to form the confused words, he asked faintly, "How long has he been ill ? how long has he been here ?"

"Ten days," she answered, briefly. She did not hesitate, nor cast down her eyes. She answered with a kind of despairing calm ; for to be sure it was certain he would take the boy away, and she had nothing else in her mind. Her own standing in respect to him—the attitude of his mind towards her—her position in the world as it depended on him—all these were nothing to her. She was thinking of the boy, of nothing else.

"He has been very ill ; what is it ? Have you a doctor for him ?" said Richard, getting used to the suppressed sound of his own voice. He was speaking like a man in a dream, struggling against some necessity which forced him to say this. It was not what he wanted to say. Had he been able to manage himself, to do as he wished, he would have said something to her very different—something kind—something to show her that he was not sorry he had seen her again—that he was not angry, but came to her with friendly feelings. But he could not. The only words he could manage to get out were these bare business-like questions, which he might have put to a nurse—only that if she had been a mere nurse, a stranger who had been kind to his boy, Richard would have been full of gratitude and thanks. He felt all this, but he could not help it ; and the more he wished to say, the less he said.

He felt this to the bottom of his heart ; but she did not feel it all. She took the questions quite naturally, and answered them with calm simplicity. "The doctor comes twice a-day. He'll be here soon. I cannot keep the name of it in my mind. Sitting up of nights makes me stupid like ; but when he comes, you'll hear."

Then there was a pause. She stood before him, with her hands clasped, waiting for what he was going to say. She had no thought of resisting or standing on her rights, for had she not given up the boy long ago ?—and waited with

keen but secret anguish for the sentence which she believed he must be about to pronounce. The door was open behind her. While she stood waiting for Richard's words, her ear was intent upon Val, ready to hear if he made the slightest movement. Between these two things which absorbed her, she was completely occupied. She had no leisure to think of herself.

But he who was alive to all the strange troubles of the position, at what a disadvantage he was ! His embarrassment and overwhelming self-consciousness were painful beyond description, while she was free from self altogether, and suffered nothing in comparison. While she stood so steadily, a tremulous quiver ran through his every limb. He was as superior to her as it is possible to conceive, and yet he was helpless and speechless before her. At last he made out, faltering, the confused words, "Do you know who he is ?"

"Yes, I know," she said, with a panting breath. A gleam of light came over her face. "I have known him ever since he was a boy. He's been Dick's friend. No lad had ever a better friend. They took a fancy to each other the first day. I heard his name—it's seven years since—and knew."

"And you told—Val—"

She gave a slight start, and looked at him reproachfully, appealingly, but made no other reply. This look disturbed Richard more and more. There was in it a higher meaning than any he seemed capable of. He felt that from some simple eminence of virtue, impossible to him to conceive, she looked down upon him, quietly indignant of, yet half pitying, his suspicions of her. And, in fact, though she was not capable of any sentiments so articulate, these, in a rudimentary confusion, were the feelings in her mind.

"I beg your pardon," he said, humbly. "Then he knows nothing ? And the other, the younger—he who is with you—"

How he faltered ! man of the world, and highbred gentleman as he was ; he did not know how to put the inquiry into words.

"Oh," she said, roused from her stillness of expectation, "don't meddle with Dick ! Oh ! sir, leave my boy alone ! You don't know—no one knows but me—how good he is. He's put up with all my wild ways. He's been willing to give up all he likes best for me ; but God's given me strength, and I've mastered myself. I've stayed quiet, though it went

near to kill me," she said, clasping her hands tightly; "I wouldn't shame him, and take his home from him. Oh, don't meddle with Dick! He's happy now."

Her entreating look, her appeal to his generosity, her absolute detachment from all emotion except in connection with her children, worked upon Richard in the strangest way. They moved him as he had never thought to be moved. His heart swelled, and filled with a novel emotion. "Is this all you think of?" he said, with, in his turn, a strange tone of reproach in his voice—"only of the children! when we meet like this after so many—so many years!"

She raised her eyes to him, wondering. I think she scarcely understood what he could mean. Her mind was so deeply occupied with other thoughts, that the tide of feeling which encountered hers was driven back by the meeting. "I'm not clever," she said, in a very low voice. "I'm ignorant—not fit to talk to you."

"But you know me?" he said, driven to his wits' end. She looked up at him quickly, with a strange suffusion in her eyes, a momentary dilation. She did not mean it to be reproachful this time. Then she said quickly—"We'll trouble no one, Dick and me. He's well off, and doing well. If you will let the other stay till he's better—who could nurse him as I would?—and leave Dick alone. I'll trouble nobody, nobody!"

"Myra," said Richard, more moved than he could say. It was not love so much as a strange reluctance to be so powerless—a curious longing to get some sign of feeling from her. He could not bear the composure in her eyes.

She gave a low cry, and made a step backwards, withdrawing from him; and at that moment a faint sound from within the sick-room caught her ear. Her expression, which had changed for the moment, came back again to that of the patient sick-nurse, the anxious watcher. "He's stirring," she said. "He wants me. I mustn't leave him. I've been too long away."

To describe the feelings of Richard Ross when she left him outside the door of the room in which his son lay ill is more than I am able for. Not since she had fled from him at first, three-and-twenty years ago, had there been such a tumult in his mind;—not the sharp tumult of passion and grief, but the strangest maze of embarrassment, pain, defeat, surprise—and yet for the moment relief. Passion was alto-

gether out of his way nowadays—I don't know that he was capable of it; but all the secondary emotions were warm in him. He had been playing with the thought of this woman for a long time, saying *maladetta*, yet scarcely meaning it—wondering, half attracted in spite of himself, and beyond measure curious to know what changes time had wrought in her, and how far Valentine's unconscious judgment was true. During this long succession of thoughts, his semi-hatred of her as the curse of his life had strangely evaporated, he could not have told how. And from the moment when he had received that first sudden shock which was given him by the little photograph, down to the present time when she left him standing outside the door, Richard had been the subject of a mental process of the most complicated and mysterious kind. From that first simple introduction of the idea of her, not as a past curse, but as a living and known human being, his thoughts had gone through a long dramatic course, picturing her, realising her, following the unknown line of her existence—making acquaintance with her image, so to speak. She had never been quite absent from his mind since Valentine had reintroduced her to it. He had imagined (in spite of himself) how she would look, what she would say and do—had even pictured to himself how she would meet him, perhaps with terror, perhaps with penitence, with a developed sense of the grievous harm she had done him, and capacity at last to understand how much he had sacrificed for her. If she had grown into an intelligent being, with that look Valentine described, “as if she had once been a lady,”—which was so curious, so bewildering a travesty of all fact—this was how she must have learned to feel; and no doubt Richard thought her first meeting with him would be trying for both, but most trying for her as the one most certain to betray emotion—the wrong-doer in whose awakened mind all feeling must be more strong. He had opened the very door of the room in which she sat with this expectation—nay certainty—in his mind. Now she had left him, and he stood bewildered, confounded, excited, not knowing what to think, and still less what to do. Was it possible that she had not a thought for him, this woman who had destroyed his life?—no feeling that she had destroyed it?—no desire for his forgiveness, no eagerness to make up, no tremulous impassioned anxiety as to what he would think of her? For all these feelings he had given her credit, and

curiously, with an interest which attracted him in spite of himself, had speculated how she would show them. But now !

After a little pause, Richard Ross, Secretary of Legation at Florence, her Majesty's future representative to some crowned head, went quite humbly down the little creaking staircase. He knew how to deal with Prime Ministers, and would not have allowed himself to be put down by Prince Bismarck himself ; but he was utterly discomfited by Dick Brown's mother, and stole down-stairs with his heart beating, and the most unexampled commotion in his whole being. When he thought of it, he even laughed at himself feebly, so confounded was he. What was to be done now ? He could not steal away as he had come, with no result to his visit. Now that they had met, and looked each other in the face again, they could not part simply with nothing further said. Was it for him to make advances ? to propose some ground of meeting ? though he was the wronged person, and though she ought in reality to approach him on her knees. When he got down-stairs, he paused again to think what he would do. And it was only then that it occurred to him that his mission here was not to reconcile himself to *her*, but to inquire after Valentine. Strange ! He had seen Valentine lying ill—he had even asked questions about him—and yet his son's state, or his son's existence, had made no impression whatever on his mind. In the curious ferment and tumult of his feelings, it occurred to him to remember the half amusement, half pain, with which he had felt two days ago that his mother hustled him off, scarcely having patience to let him eat and rest, in order that he might see after Val ; and here was his wife treating him in the same way—thrusting him aside, postponing him altogether ! There was a whimsical aggravation in this double slight which made him laugh even now ; and then a sudden heat flamed all over his frame, like a sudden blaze scorching him ; his wife ! He had used the words unconsciously, unawares—not *maladetta !*—not the woman who had been his curse. In the curious excitement of that thought, he went in once more to the little parlour, and sat down instinctively to get quiet and calm himself ; and then, catching at the first straw of reason which blew his way in this strange tempest of feeling, he decided that he must wait there, now that he was there, till the doctor came.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ONE nail strikes out another, the Italians say. It was not wonderful that Richard Ross should feel this, seeing that the subject which concerned his own individual life most closely was that which drove out of his mind all immediate recollection of the other which was the object of his journey. But that the strange and startling apparition of the new figure which suddenly confronted her should have driven the recollection of Valentine out of Lady Eskside's head, was much more wonderful—for her heart was rent with anxiety about Val; whereas Richard was only vaguely, lightly affected by that anxiety; and there was no such magic of old associations, old passions, curiosity, and that baffled sense of impotence which provokes the mind to put forth its whole powers, in her mind as in his. But for the moment Lady Eskside forgot her beloved boy, and her devouring anxiety; forgot everything but the shock and startling sensation produced upon her by this face which suddenly looked at her, meeting her gaze calmly, unaware of its own power. When she brought Dick Brown to a stop in his explanations by her eager, almost wild question, "Who are you?" the subject which up to that moment had been engrossing her whole mind departed wholly out of it. Poor Val, lying upon his mother's bed! He was wronged even by those who loved him best—he was forgotten, if only for a moment, in the strain and stress of affairs more urgent; but happily did not know it. Dick was very much embarrassed, good fellow, to find himself suddenly elevated into a place of such importance, and to be asked so passionately, so urgently, who he was. Nothing in the world more easy than to give an account of himself. He smiled, involuntarily, at the anxiety in Lady Eskside's face.

"It is very easy to tell you that, ma'am," he said. "I didn't send my name, thinking you wouldn't know. I'm Richard Brown, head man now at Mr Styles's, the boat-builder at Oxford, and for three years at Goodman's, at Eton. That is all about me."

"What is it?" said the old lady. "No, I am not deaf—you need not speak loud; but say it again. Richard? Yes,

yes ; of course it could be nothing but Richard. And you came to tell me that ? Is your mother living ? is she still living ? and where is she ? Was it she that sent you here ? ”

“ I came to tell you about Mr Ross——”

“ Boy,” said Lady Eskside, “ don’t trifling with me. This was what drove my darling away. Is the woman living, and do you know where she is ? Your face tells a great deal,” she went on, “ but not all. Where is your mother ? Did she send you ? Is she near ? Oh, for God’s sake, if you have any pity, tell me ! What with one trouble and another, I am near at an end of my strength.”

“ Mr Ross is ill, ma’am,” said Dick, much bewildered, but holding fast to his mother’s *consigne*, not to say anything about her. “ He is lying ill at our—at my house.”

“ What could he be but ill,” cried the old lady, drying her eyes, “ after all that has come and gone ? But don’t think that I’ll let you go now. Richard, perhaps you are ignorant, perhaps you don’t know how important it is—but oh, for God’s sake, tell me ? Have you got her ? have you got her safe this time ? Come near to me ; you have a kindly face,” my lady went on, looking closely at him with the tears in her eyes. “ A face I knew as well as I know myself ; but kind and young, like what he was before the world touched him. Sit down here ; and oh, my bonnie man, have confidence in me ! ”

She laid her delicate old hand upon his arm ; she bent towards him, her face all tremulous with emotion, tears in her eyes, her lips quivering, her voice pathetic and tender as the cooing of a dove. Dick looked at her in return with respectful sympathy, with natural kindness, but with a half smile of wonder. What was it she wanted of him ? What could he respond to such an appeal ?

“ I don’t know, ma’am, what I can do for you, what I can tell you,” he said ; “ I’m but a working man, not educated to speak of. There is nothing particular about me that I should confide in any one ; but if you’ll tell me what it is you want, I’ve nothing to conceal neither,” the young man said with a gentle pride, so innocent and honest that it made his smile all the brighter. “ You are welcome, ma’am, if you care for it, to know everything about me.”

“ I do care for it,” she said, keeping her hand upon his arm. She had made him sit beside her on the little sofa,

and her eyes were so intent upon his face, that he scarcely knew how to sustain the gaze. He paused a little to think what he could say first.

"I don't know what to tell you, ma'am," he said, with a laugh; "it's all in what I've said already. Except about Mr Ross—perhaps that is what you mean; I can't say, and you can't think what he's done for me. My life is more a story about him than anything about me," said Dick, with a generous glow coming over his face, "since the day I first met him on the river——"

"That was—how long ago?"

"He wasn't in the boats till the year after," said Dick, availing himself of the easiest mode of calculating. "It's about seven years since—we were both boys, so to speak. He took to me somehow, ma'am—out of his own head—by chance—so some folks says——"

Under other circumstances no story could have been so interesting to Lady Eskside, but at present her mind was too much disturbed to follow it. She interrupted him hastily—"And your mother! what of her? You tell me nothing about her! Was she there as well as you?"

Dick felt as it is natural to feel when you are interrupted in a congenial story, and that your own story, the most interesting of all narratives. He repeated—"My mother!" in a tone of disappointment. How his mother could be more interesting to any one than Mr Ross and himself, and that tale of their meeting, which he had already told successfully more than once, Dick did not know.

"Yes, your mother! Tell me her name, and how she brought you up, and where she is living—for she is living, you said? Tell me! and after that," said Lady Eskside, in an unconsciously insinuating tone, "I shall be able to listen to you about my poor Val, and all that you have had to do with him. Ah! be sure that is what I would like best! but the other, the other is more important. Where is she? What does she call herself? How did she bring you up? Oh! don't lose time, my good boy, but tell me this, for I must know!"

Dick became much confused and disturbed, remembering his mother's caution to him not to mention her. He could not understand why she should thus be dragged into question. But she had evidently expected it, which was very perplexing to him. He faltered a little in his reply.

"My mother—is just my mother, ma'am. She lives with me ; she's nursing Mr Ross now."

The old lady gave a cry, and grasped him by the arm. "Has she told him ?" she cried. "Does Val know ?"

"Know what ?" said Dick, in amaze. She gazed at him intently for a moment, and then all at once fell a-crying and wringing her hands.

"Is my boy ill ?" she said. "What is the matter with him ? how soon can we go to him ? Will you take me there, Richard, as quick as we can go ? Your mother is nursing him—you are sure ? and you don't know anything she could have told him ? Oh, let us go ! there is not a moment to lose."

She got up hastily to ring the bell, then sat down again. "There will be no train—no train till to-night or to-morrow ; oh, these trains, that have always to be waited for ! In old days you could start in your post-chaise without waiting a minute. And, poor lad, you will want a rest," she added, turning to look at him, "and food. Oh, but if you knew the fever in my mind till I am there !"

"Don't be too anxious," said Dick, compassionately, understanding this better ; "the crisis cannot come for four days yet, and the doctor says my mother is an excellent nurse, and that he'll pull through."

Lady Eskside rose again in her restlessness and rang the bell. "Bring something for this gentleman to eat," she said, when Harding appeared ; "bring a tray to the dining-room ; and get me the paper about the trains ; and let none of the other fools of men come about me to stare and stare !" she cried, fretfully. "Serve us yourself. And bid your wife come here—I have something to say to her."

"To the dining-room, my lady ?"

"Didn't I say here !" cried Lady Eskside. "You're all alike, never understanding. Send Marg'ret here."

Mrs Harding must have been very close behind, for she followed almost instantly. She gave a little cry at sight of Dick. I fear this was not so independent a judgment as Lady Eskside supposed, for of course her husband had suggested the resemblance she was called upon to remark ; but, at the same time, she had no unbounded confidence in her husband's judgment, and was upon the whole as likely as not to have declared against him. Lady Eskside turned sharply round upon her. "What are you crying out about,

Marg'ret? I expected a woman like you to have more sense. What I wanted to tell you was, that I am going away for a day or two. Well; why are you staring at a stranger so?"

"Oh, my lady!" cried Mrs Harding, "it's no possible but what you see——"

"Ay, ay—I see, I see," cried Lady Eskside, moved to tears; "well I see! and if it please God," she added, devoutly, "I almost think the long trouble's over. Marg'ret, you'll not say anything; but I have no doubt you know what it has been this many a year."

"Oh, my lady! yes, my lady! How could I be in the house and no know?"

"It is just like you all!" cried Lady Eskside, with another sudden change of sentiment; "prying into other folk's business, instead of being attentive to your own; just like you all! But keep your man quiet, Marg'ret Harding, and hold your tongue yourself. That's what I think," she went on, softly, "but nothing's clear."

Dick sat and listened to all this, wondering. He thought she was a very strange old lady to change her tone and manner so often; but there was enough of sympathetic feeling in him to show that, though he could not tell how she was moved, she was much moved and excited. He was sorry for her. She had so kind a look that it went to his heart. Was it all for Val's sake? and what did she mean about his mother? Somehow he could not connect his own old suspicions as to who his father was with this altogether new acquaintance. He got confused, and felt all power to think abandoning him. In everything she said, it was his mother who seemed to have the first place; and Dick felt that he knew all about his mother, though his father was a mystery to him. Of what importance could she be—a tramp, a vagrant, a woman whom he himself had only been able to withdraw from the fields and roads with difficulty—what could she be to this stately old lady? Dick, for his part, was deeply confounded, and did not know what to think.

She came up to him with a tremulous smile when the housekeeper went away. "Richard," she said, speaking to him as if (he thought) she had known him all his life—"if I am right in what I think, you and I will be great friends some day. Was it you that my boy wrote about, that he was so fond of when he was at Eton?—oh, how blind I have

been!—that had a mother you were very good to? My man, was that you?"

"Yes, ma'am—my lady—I suppose it was me——"

"That worked so well, and raised yourself in the world? that he was going to see always, till some fool, some meddling fool that knew no better," cried Lady Eskside, "wrote to my old lord to stop it? But I thank God I did not stop it!" said my lady, the tears running down her cheeks. "I thank the Lord I had confidence in my boy! Richard! it was you that all this happened about? You are sure it was you?"

"There could not be two of us," he said, his face lighted up with feeling; for Dick, good fellow, though he did not know why she was crying, felt something rise in his throat at the sight of the old lady's tears. "Yes, ma'am—I mean, my lady."

"Don't call me my lady, my bonnie man! call me—but never mind—we'll wait awhile; we'll do nothing rash," cried Lady Eskside. "You're hungry and tired all this time, while I've been thinking of myself and of Val, and not of you. Come and have something to eat, Richard; and then you'll take me to my boy."

But Lady Eskside was two or three years over seventy. She was worn out with anxiety, and now with the sudden excitement of this visitor. She had taken neither food nor sleep, much as her years required all natural support, since Val had disappeared; and before her preparations could be made, she herself allowed that to attempt to travel by the night train would be foolish and unavailing. "I don't want to die before it's all settled," she said, smiling and crying. "We'll have to wait till to-morrow." And Dick, who had travelled all night, was very willing to wait. She sat by him and talked to him while he had his meal, and for an hour or more after; and though Dick was not stupid, he was a child in the hands of the clever old lady, who recovered all her spirit now that her anxiety was removed, and this wonderful power of setting everything right was put into her hands. Lady Eskside was but human, and, so far as she was aware, no one but herself had the faintest inkling of this blessed way of clearing up the troubles of the family, or knew anything of Dick Brown and his mother. She felt that she had found it out, that it would be her part to clear it all up, and the thought was sweet to her. And as for

her anxiety, Dick made so light of Valentine's illness, which he had himself ceased to be alarmed about, that Lady Eskside felt almost happy to hear of the fever which supplied her with a reason for Val's silence without communicating any alarm to her mind. Very soon she knew everything about Dick,—more than he knew himself—his tramp-life, his wanderings with his mother, his longings for something better, for a home and settled dwelling-place. And Dick, without knowing, made such a picture of his mother as touched the old lady's heart. "She used to sit at the window and watch for the boat. That was the first thing that reconciled her a bit," said Dick. "She used to watch and watch for Mr Ross's boat, and sit like a statue when we'd started him, to see him come back. She always took a deal of interest in Mr Ross."

"Did she ever tell you why?"

"Because he was so kind," said Dick. "I've thought often there was more in it than that; but what could a fellow say to his mother, ma'am? I wasn't one to worry her with questions. That's how she used to sit watching. Mother is strange often; but there never was any harm in her," said Dick, fervently—"never! The others would hold their tongues when she was by—I've thought of it often since; and when she saw my heart was set on settling down, she gave into it, all on my account—though what she liked was different. That is what I call a good woman!" he cried, encouraged by the attention and sympathy with which his story was received. Lady Eskside thus learnt more in an hour of the woman who had cost her so dear, than she could have done otherwise in years. She found out everything about her. She even got to feel for and pity the mother—ignorant, foolish, unwitting what harm she was doing—who thus kept to her savage point of honour, and never betrayed herself nor claimed her son. Dick, unconscious, told everything. It was only on thinking it over after that he remembered again his mother's charge not to say anything of her. "Say only it's your mother." Well! he said to himself, he had said no more. It was as his mother that he had spoken of her, and as that alone. He knew her in no other character. He had spoken of her life, her habits, her goodness; but he had told nothing more. There was not, indeed, anything more to tell, had he wished to betray her.

In the afternoon, Lady Eskside was persuaded to go and rest—a repose which she wanted mightily—and Dick was left alone. It was then that he began to think that possibly he had been indiscreet in his revelations ; and he was somewhat frightened, to tell the truth, when he found himself left in the great drawing-room alone. He did not know whether it would be right for him to wait there, where Lady Eskside left him, until she came back. He felt a little doubtful whether he might examine the great cabinets, and all the curious things he saw, and which fired him with interest. He could not do them any harm, at last he reflected ; and he did not think the kind old lady would object. So he got out his note-book, and made little drawings of various things that struck his fancy. The wonder being over for the moment, and the pressure of Lady Eskside's questions, Dick's mind gladly retired from it altogether, and returned to easier everyday matters. That this discovery, whatever it was, should make any difference in his life, did not seem to him at all a likely idea ; nor did such a notion seriously enter his mind. And no thought of the possible transference of his own lowly and active life to such surroundings as those which were now about him, ever occurred to Dick. He would have been extremely amused by the idea. But he made a note in his book—a rough little drawing, yet quite enough to be a guide to him—of sundry little “details”—arrangements of brackets and shelves, which he thought might be adapted even to his little place on a small scale. He had his eyes always about him, ready to note anything of the kind ; and though he smiled to himself at the idea of copying in his tiny parlour what he saw in this great room, yet he made his drawings all the same, with his rough workman's pencil. The drawings were very rough, but he knew how to work from them, and in his mind's eye already saw a homely imitation of the objects he admired figuring upon his low walls. He even thought it would amuse Val, when he got better, to see in the boatman's parlour a humble copy of the brackets in Rossraig.

And after this, as one of the windows was open, he strayed out, with some perturbation, lest he should be taking too much upon him, and wandered through the shrubberies, and out into the woods. It was a soft spring afternoon, the sun near its setting, the trees showing a faint greenness, the sound of the Esk filling the air. The river was full and

strong, swelled by the spring rains, and by the melting of all the early frosts. It made a continuous murmur, filling the whole soft universe around with an all-pervading sound. Dick had almost forgotten what the woods were like in the early spring ; and the charm of the stillness and the woodland rustle, the slanting lines of light, the bright gleams of green, the tender depths of shadow, stole into his heart. He had a still, profound, undemonstrative enjoyment of nature, loving her without being able to put his love into words ; and the beauty of those irregular banks, all broken with light and shade, topped with trees which threw up their tall columns towards the sky, waiting till the blessing of new life should come upon them—delighted the young man, who for years had known no finer scenery than the unexciting precincts of the Thames. Dear Thames, kind river, forgive the words !—ungrateful words to come from the lips of one who owes thee untold pleasures ; but soft meadows and weeping willows, and all the gentle lights and shadows of the level stream, looked tame beside the foaming, tumbling river, rushing with shouts among its rocks, singing over its pebbles, leaping and hurrying onward through all those bold braes that hemmed it in, and played perpetual chase and escape with the brown torrent. The trees on Eskside were not the grand broad placid trees to which Dick was used. Red firs, with the sun on their great russet pillars ; white birches, poising daintily on every fairy knowe ; pale ash-trees, long-limbed and bare—mixed with the few oaks and beeches, and gave a different character to the scene ; and here and there a bold bit of brown rock, a slip of red earth, the stony course of a burn which went rattling in hot haste to join the Esk, crossing the path and toppling down in dozens of tiny waterfalls—all these were like nothing he had ever seen before. He strayed on a little further and a little further, by bypaths of which Val knew every curve and corner, under trees, every one of which, could they have spoken, would have asked for news of their young lord. Sometimes it occurred to him, with a sense of additional pleasure, that all this would one day belong to his young patron. Would Val ever ask him to come here, he wondered ? then “Lord bless me !” said Dick to himself, “why should he ?” He’ll always be kind and good as long as he lives ; but why should he ask the like of me ?” and he laughed at his own absurdity. But what with these thoughts,

and what with no thought at all, mere pleasure, which perhaps carries farthest, he went on, much farther than he knew, as far as the linn and the two great beeches which had played so great a part in Val's life. Just before he reached that point he was stopped by a sudden sound which startled him, which had a distinct tone of humanity in it, and did not spring from the fresh and free nature about. It was the sound of a sob. Dick stood still and looked about him, with recollections of his own childhood rising fresh into his mind, and a tender thought of finding some poor little tired wanderer under some tree, crying for weariness. But he could see nothing, and presently went on again, persuading himself that his ears must have deceived him. He went on, himself rousing intermittent echoes, for his step was sometimes inaudible on the mossy turf, and sometimes sent thrills of sound all through the wood, as his foot crashed on a fallen branch, or struck the pebbles aside in a little shower.

When he got to the linn he paused for some time on the edge of the river, struck by the beauty of the place; and only when he was passing on, perceived behind him, all at once, somebody sitting at the foot of one of the trees—a little figure muffled in a blue cloak, and leaning against the bole of one of the big beeches. Dick made an unconscious exclamation—"I beg your pardon!"—and went hastily on, half frightened lest he should have disturbed some one who had a better right to be there than he had. But this incident broke the spell of his wandering, and recalled him to the thought that he was far from Ross-craig, and that it would be safer to turn back as he had come, than to risk losing his way. Perhaps a little curiosity about the solitary figure under the tree had something to do with this prudent thought; but his curiosity was lessened by a second glance he had stolen through the trees, which showed him that it was a lady who sat there. Had it been a tramp-woman, Dick might have shown his sympathy; but upon a lady, even one in trouble, he could not intrude; and yet he could not help being interested. Could it be from her that the sob had come? and why should she be crying here, all alone, like an enchanted princess? He knew little about enchanted princesses, but he had a tender heart, and the sob had troubled him. He went back again, passing slowly, trying to make out, without staring—which was not consistent with Dick's idea of "manners"—who

it was, and what she was doing under the shadow of the tree. The soft grass glade between these two giants of the wood was lighted up by a slant ray of the sun which slid all the way down the high bank on the other side of Esk, to pour that oblique line of glory under the great sweeping boughs over the greensward. She was seated out of the sunshine, but with her face turned towards the light, and it seemed to Dick that it was a face he had seen before. I do not think the fact that it was a young face, and a fair one, touched him so much as that it was very pale and mournful, justifying his idea that the sob must somehow have belonged to it. How he would have liked to linger, to ask what was the matter ! He would have done so, had she not been a lady ; but Dick knew his place. His surprise was great, however, when, as soon as his back was turned, he heard a stir, a sound of footsteps, a faint call, which seemed addressed to him. He turned round quickly. The girl, whoever she was, had risen from her seat. She had come out of the shade into the sunshine, and was standing between the trees, with the light upon her, catching a glittering edge of hair, and giving a hem of brightness to one side of her figure, and to the outlines of the blue cloak. "I beg your pardon ; did you call me ?" said Dick, shy but eager. Perhaps she had lost her way. Perhaps she wanted help of one kind or another. Then the little woodland lady beckoned to him timidly. I think, if it had not been for the anxiety and longing that swelled her heart wellnigh to bursting, Violet would never have had the courage thus to appeal to a stranger in the wood.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SHE advanced a step to meet him, timid, yet with that confidence which social superiority gives : for Dick, I am bound to confess, though I love him, was not one of those wonderful beings who bear the exterior of a fine gentleman even in a workman's clothes. He was not vulgar in any respect, being perfectly free from every kind of pretension, and with all the essence of fine manners—that politeness of the heart

which neither birth nor education by themselves can give ; but though, as I have said, his dress was to a certain degree copied from Valentine's—who possessed the *je ne sais quoi* in perfection—and was quite well made and unobtrusive, yet I am obliged to allow that Dick had not that mysterious something which makes a gentleman. You could have found no fault with his appearance, and to look at his candid countenance was to trust him ; but yet he had not the *je ne sais quoi*, and Violet knew that, conventionally speaking, she was addressing one who was "not a gentleman ;" this fact gave her a degree of freedom in calling him which she would scarcely have felt with a stranger of her own class. But more than that, Violet had recognised Dick. It was some years since she had seen him, but she remembered him. Not all at once, it is true. When he appeared first, before he saw her, she had felt as he did, that she had seen his face before ; but ere he passed again, she had made out where and how it was that she had seen him ; for it must be recollected that Violet's heart was full to overflowing with thoughts of Val, of whom this stranger, so suddenly and strangely appearing, was a kind of shadow in her mind. The whole scene, in which she had seen this stranger, came before her as by a flash of light, after five minutes' pondering within herself—for from the first glance she had felt that he was somehow associated with Valentine. What could bring him here, this boatman from the Thames ? Her heart was breaking for news of her young lover, so dismally parted from her, whom she must never see again (she thought) ; but only to hear his name, to know where he was, would be something. She would not have betrayed herself to "a gentleman," to one of Val's friends and equals ; but of "Mr Brown"—she remembered even his name by good fortune—she might make her inquiries freely. So, urged by the anguish in her poor little breast, Vi took this bold step. She had been sitting thus for hours crying all alone, and thinking to herself that this horrible blank was to go on for ever, that she would nevermore hear of him even—and I have not the heart to blame her for appealing thus to the first possibility of help. She made a step forward and looked at him with a pitiful little smile. "Perhaps you do not remember," she said, "but I think I am sure it is you. I never forget people whom I have once seen. Did not you row us once, on the Thames, at Eton—my father and——"

"Oh yes, ma'am, to be sure!" cried Dick. "I knew that I had seen you before." He was a little confused, after his experience with Lady Eskside, how he ought to address a lady, but after reflection decided that "ma'am" must always be right; for had he not heard the Queen herself addressed by the finest of fine ladies as "Ma'am"?

"Yes; and I remember you," said Vi. Then she made a pause, and with a wistful glance at him, and a sudden flush which went as quickly as it came, added—"I am Mr Ross's cousin."

"I recollect now," cried Dick. "He was so set on it that you should see everything. I think he was a bit better when I left."

"Better!" cried Violet, clasping her hands together; "was he—" She was going to say, was he ill? and then reflected that, perhaps, it was best not to betray to a stranger how little she knew of him. So she stood looking up in his face, with great eyes dilated. Her eyes had been pathetic and full of entreaty even when poor Vi was at her happiest. Now there is no telling how beseeching those pretty eyes were, with the tears stealing into them, making them bigger, softer, more liquid and tender still. This look quite made an end of poor Dick, who felt disposed to cry too for company, and was aware of some strange, unusual movements in his own good heart.

"Don't you fret," he said soothingly; "I brought the old lady the news this morning. He had an accident, and his illness was sudden. But it had nothing to do with the accident," he added. "Don't be frightened, ma'am. It's some fever, but not the worst kind; and the doctor told me himself that he'd pull through."

"Oh, Mr Brown!" cried poor Vi. She dropped down upon a fallen tree, and began to cry, so that he could scarcely look at her for pity.

"Indeed you must not be frightened," said Dick. "I am not anxious a bit, after what the doctor told me. Neither is the old lady up there at the Castle—Lady Eskside. She is going with me to-morrow morning to help to nurse him. Mother has him in hand," Dick added with a little pride, "and he's very safe with her. Don't fret like this—now don't! when I tell you the doctor says he'll pull through!"

"Oh Val, Val, my Val!" cried poor little Violet. It was not because she was frightened; for at her age—unless

experience has taught otherwise—getting better seems so necessary, so inevitable a conclusion to being ill. She was not afraid of his life ; but her heart was rent with pity, with tenderness, with that poignant touching remorse, to which the innocent are liable. All that had gone before, all that Valentine had suffered, seemed to come back to her. It was not her fault, but it was “our” fault. She seemed to herself to be involved in the cause of it, though she would have died sooner than harm him. Her lips began to quiver, the tears rained through the fingers with which she tried to hide her piteous streaming eyes. “Oh Val, Val, my Val !” she cried. It was “our” fault ; her father had done it, and even good Sandy had had his share ; and herself, who had twined her foolish little life with his, so that even parting with her had been another complication in Valentine’s woes. She seemed to see him looking up at her in the moonlight, bidding her good-bye. Oh, why did he think of her ? why did he take that trouble for her ? She scarcely heard Dick’s anxious attempts at consolation. She was not thinking of the future, in which, no doubt—how could she doubt it ?—Valentine would get better ; but of the past and of all that made him ill. Her tears, her abandonment to that sorrow, her attempts to command herself, went to Dick’s heart. He stood looking at her, wondering wistfully for the first time in his life over the differences in men’s lots. If he (Dick) were to fall ill, his mother, no doubt, would be grieved ; but Dick knew that it would create no commotion in the world ; would not “upset” any one as Val’s illness did. Naturally, the good fellow felt, Mr Ross was of much more importance than he was, or could ever be ; but still——

“Oh, how foolish you must think me !” cried Violet, drying her eyes. “It is not that I am frightened. It is because I know all that made him ill. Oh, Mr Brown, tell me about it—tell me everything ! He is my cousin, and he has always been like my—brother. He used to bring me here when I was a child. You can’t think how everything here is full of him—and then all at once never to hear a word !” Between every broken sentence the tears fell in little bright showers from Violet’s eyes.

Dick sat down on the same fallen tree, but at a respectful distance, and told her all he knew—which was not everything, for his mother had not entered into details, and he knew little about the incident on the river, and her share in

it. Violet listened, never taking her eyes from his face, which was hard upon Dick, yet not undelightful to him. He had gone through a great many experiences that morning. But even Lady Eskside's strange emotion, her curiosity about himself, and agitated manner, had not the same effect as this still more unexpected and strange encounter. He sat, at first rather awkwardly, upon the edge of his end of the tree, with his face turned towards her, but not always bold enough to look at her. The slant of the sunbeam, which was gradually dying off the scene, fell in the middle between them like a rail of gold, separating them from each other. Across this heavenly line of separation her eyes shone like stars, often bewildering Dick, though he kept pretty straight in his narrative, taking as little account as possible of the occasional giddiness that came over him, and the dazzling sensation in his eyes. Violet, interrupting him now and then by a brief question, sometimes crying softly under her breath, gave her entire attention to every word ; and Esk ran on through all, with a murmur as of a third person keeping them company ; and the wood contributed those numberless soft sounds which make up the silence of nature, enveloping them in an atmosphere of her own. Dick was not much given to poetry, but he felt like something in a fairy tale. It was an experience altogether new and strange ; for hitherto there had been no enchantments in his life. How different it was to her and to him ! To the young man, the first thrill of romance, the first touch of magic—the beginning of all sweet delusions, follies, and dreams ; to the girl, an imperfect, faltering narrative, filled out by imagination, a poor, blurred picture—better, far better, indeed, than nothing, and giving her for the moment a kind of miserable happiness, but in itself nothing. It is frightful to think at what a disadvantage people meet each other in this world. Dick's life, which had all been honest prose up to this moment, became on the spot, poetry ; but, poor fellow, he was nothing but prose, poor prose to Vi, to whom these woods were full of all the lyric melodies of young life. She listened to him without thinking of him, drinking in every word and not ungrateful, any more than she was ungrateful to the fallen tree, or the beech boughs that sheltered her. Nay, she had a warmer feeling, a sense of grateful friendship, to Dick.

“ Mr Brown,” she said, when his tale was done, “ I am

very, very thankful to you for telling me. I should never have known but for you. For I ought to say that my people and Val's people—I mean my cousin's—are not quite—quite good friends. I must not say whose fault it is," said Vi, with a suppressed sob; "and I don't see Lady Eskside now—so without you I should not have known. Mr Brown! would you mind writing—a little note—just two lines—to say how he is when you get back?"

"Mind!" said Dick. "If you will let me——"

"And you can tell him when he gets well," cried the girl, her voice sinking very low, her eyes leaving Dick's face, and straying into the glow of sunshine (as he thought) between the two great trees—"you can tell him that you met me here; and that I was thinking of him, and was glad—glad to hear of him——" To show her gladness, Violet let drop two great tears which for some time had been brimming over her eyelids. "It is dreadful to be parted from a friend and to hear no word; but now that I know, it will not be so hard. Mr Brown, you will be sure to send just two lines, two words, to tell me——"

Here her voice faltered, and lost itself in a flutter of suppressed sound—sobs painfully restrained, which yet would burst forth. She did her very best, poor child, to master them, and turning to Dick with a pathetic smile, whispered as well as she could—"I can't tell you how it all is. It is not only for Val being ill. It is everything—everything that is wrong! Papa, too—but I can't tell you; only tell him that you met Violet at the linn."

"I will tell him everything you have said. I will write, if you like, every day," cried poor Dick, his heart wrung with sympathy—and with envy as well.

"Would that be too much?" she asked, with an entreat-ing look. "Oh, if it would not be too much! And, Mr Brown, perhaps it will be best to send it to mamma. I cannot have any secrets, though I may be unhappy. If you will give me a piece of paper, I will write the address, and thank you—oh, how I will thank you!—all my life."

Dick, who felt miserable himself, he could scarcely tell why, got out his note-book, with all the rough little draw-ings in it of the brackets at Rossraig. He had not known, when he put them down, how much more was to befall him in this one brief afternoon. She wrote the address with a little hand which trembled.

"My hand is so unsteady," she said. "I am spoiling your book. I must write it over again. Oh, I beg your pardon; my hand never used to shake. Tell Val—but no, no. It is better that you should not tell him anything more."

"Whatever you bid me I will tell him. I will do anything, everything you choose to say," said Dick, in his fervour. She gave a surprised wistful look at him, and shook her head.

"I must think for both of us," she said; "and Val is very hasty, very rash. No, you must not say anything more. Tell him I am quite well if he asks, and not unhappy—not very unhappy—only anxious to know; and when he is well," she said, with a reluctant little sigh, "you need not mind writing any more. That will be enough. It is a terrible thing when there are quarrels in families, Mr Brown."

"Yes, indeed," said Dick, who knew nothing about families, nor about quarrels, but followed with a curious solemnity the infantine angelical wisdom and gravity of her face.

"A terrible thing when people try to hurt each other who ought to love each other; and some of us must always pay for it," said poor Violet, in deep seriousness—"always, always some one must suffer; when it might be so different! If you are going back to Rosscraig, you should go before the sun sets, for it is far, when you don't know the way."

"And you?" said Dick, rising in obedience to this dismissal, yet longing to linger, to prolong the conversation, and not willing to allow that this strange episode in his life had come to an end.

"My way is not the same as yours," she said, holding out her hand with gentle grandeur, like a little princess, sweet and friendly, but stooping out of a loftier region, "and I know every step. Good-bye, and thank you with all my heart. You must keep this path straight up past the firs. I am very, very glad I was here."

"Good-bye, Miss Violet," said Dick. It gave him a little pleasure to say her name, which was so pretty and sweet; and he was too loyal and too respectful to linger after this farewell, but walked away as a man goes out of a royal presence, not venturing to stay after the last gracious word has been said. He could not bear to go, but would not remain even a moment against her will. When he had gone a little way he ventured to turn back and look—but nothing was

visible except the trees. She had disappeared, and the sunshine had disappeared ; it seemed to Dick's awakened fancy as if both must have gone together. The last golden arrow of light was gliding from the opposite bank of the river, and the glade between the bushes lay dim in the greyness of the evening. What a change it made ! He went on with a sigh. Violet had gone back to the foot of the tree, and was waiting there till he should be out of sight ; and Dick divined that this was the case, and that she wanted no more of him. Well ! why should she want any more of him ? She was a lady, quite out of Dick's way, and she had been very sweet to him—as gracious as a queen. Between this impersonation of sweet youth, and the other figure, old Lady Eskside, with her dignity and agitated kindness, Dick was wonderfully dazzled. If all ladies were like these, what a strange sort of enchantment it must be to spend one's life in such society. Dick had never known any woman but his mother, whom he loved, and upon whose will he had often been dependent, but to whom he was always in some degree forbearing and indulgent, puzzled by her caprices, and full of that tender patience towards her which has in its very nature something of superiority ; and to find himself suddenly in the society of these two ladies, one after the other, both taking him into their confidence, betraying their feelings to him, receiving, as it were, favours at his hand, had the most curious effect upon his mind.

Dick had never felt so melancholy in his life as when Violet thus sent him away ; and yet his head was full of a delicious intoxication, a sense of something elevated, ethereal, above the world and all its common ways. Should he ever see her again, he wondered ? would she speak to him as she had done now, and ask his help, and trust to his sympathy ? Poor Dick had not the remotest idea that these new sensations in his mind, this mixture of delight and of melancholy, this stirring up of all emotions, which made his long walk through the woods feel like a swallow-flight to him, had anything to do with the vulgar frenzy he had heard of, which silly persons called falling in love. He had always felt very superior and rather contemptuous of this weakness, which young men of his class feel, no doubt, in its more delicate form, like others, but which is seldom spoken of among them in any but that coarse way which revolts all gentle natures. So he was totally unwarmed and unarmed against any insidi-

ous beginnings of sentiment, and would have resented indignantly the idea that his tender sympathy with this little lady, who had opened her heart to him, had anything whatever in it of the character of love. How could it have?—when the very foundation of this strange sweet revelation to him of an utterly new kind of intercourse and companionship, was the love, or something that he supposed must be love, between Mr Ross, his patron, and this little princess of the woods? What a lucky fellow Mr Ross was, Dick thought, with the tenderest, friendliest version of envy that ever entered a man's bosom! and then it occurred to him, with a little sigh, to think that the lots of men in this world were very different; but he was not, he hoped, so wretched a fellow as to grudge his best friend any of the good things that were in his share. Thus he went back to RossCraig with his mind entirely filled with a new subject—a subject which made him less sensitive even than he was before to any new light upon his own position. He looked at Violet's writing in his note-book with very bewildering feelings when he got at night to the luxurious room where he was to sleep. She had written the address very unsteadily, then crossed it out, and repeated it with great care and precision—Mrs Pringle, Moray Place, Edinburgh. Though it slightly chilled him to think that this was her mother's name, not her own, yet the sense of having this little bit of her in his breast-pocket was very delightful and very strange. He sat and looked at it for a long time. On the page just before it were these notes he had made of the brackets in the great drawing-room. These were the tangible evidences of this strange mission of his, and sudden introduction into a life so different from his own. It just crossed his mind to wonder whether these scratches on the paper would be all, whether he might look them up years hence to convince himself that it was not a dream. And then poor Dick gave a great sigh, so full and large, expanding his deep bosom, that it almost blew out his candles; whereupon he gave a laugh, poor fellow, and said his prayers, and got to bed.

As for Lady Eskside, she showed more weakness that particular evening than had been visible, I think, all her life before. She could not sleep, but kept Mrs Harding by her bedside, talking, giving her mysterious but yet intelligible confidences. "You'll set to work, Marg'ret, as soon as I'm gone, to have all the new wing put in order, the carpets put

down, and the curtains put up, and everything ready for habitation. I cannot quite say who may be coming, but it is best to be ready. My poor old lord's new wing, that gave him so much trouble! It will be strange to see it lived in after so many years!"

"Indeed, and it will that, my lady," said Mrs Harding, discreet and cautious.

"It will that! I don't suppose that you take any interest," said Lady Eskside, "beyond just the furniture, and so forth?—though you've lived under our roof and ate our bread these thirty years!"

Mrs Harding was a prudent woman, and knew that too much interest was even more dangerous than too little. "The furniture is a great thought," she said demurely, "to a person in my position, my lady. If you'll mind that I'm responsible for everything; and I canna forget it's all new, and that there is aye the risk that the moths may have got into the curtains. I've had more thought about these curtains," said the housekeeper, with a sigh, "than the Queen hersel' takes about the state."

"You and your moths!" said my lady, with sharp scorn. "Oh, Marg'ret Harding, it's little you know about it! If there was any way of keeping the canker and the care out of folk's hearts! And what is it to you that I'm standing on the verge of, I don't know what—that I've got the thread in my hand that's failed us so long—that maybe after all, after all, my old lord may get his way, and everything be smooth, plain, and straight for them that come after us? What's this to you? I am a foolish old woman to say a word. Oh, if my Mary were but here!"

"My lady, it's a great deal to me, and I'm as anxious as I can be; but if I were to take it upon me to speak, what would I get by it?" said Mrs Harding, driven to self-defence. "The like of us, we have to know everything, and never speak."

"Marg'ret, my woman, I cannot be wrong this time—it's not possible that I can be wrong this time," said Lady Eskside. "You were very much struck yourself when you saw the young—when you saw my visitor. I could see it in your face—and your husband too. He's not a clever man, but he's been a long time about the house."

"He's clever enough, my lady," said the housekeeper. "Neither my lord nor you would do with your owre clever

men, and I canna be fashed with them mysel'. Now, my man, if he's no that gleg, he's steady; and I'm aye to the fore," said Mrs Harding, calmly. This was a compensation of nature which was not to be overlooked.

" You see, you knew his father so well," said Lady Eskside, with an oracular dimness which even Mrs Harding's skill could scarcely interpret; and then she added softly, " God bless them! God bless them both!"

" My lady," said the housekeeper, puzzled, " you'll never be fit to travel in the morning, if you don't get a good sleep."

" That's true, that's true; but yet you might say, God bless them. The Angel that redeemed us from all evil, bless the lads," murmured the old lady, under her breath. " Good night. You may go away, you hard-hearted woman; I'll try to sleep."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LORD ESKSIDE was seated in a little dingy sitting-room in Jermyn Street. Once upon a time, long years ago, the Esksides had possessed a town-house in a region which is no longer habitable by lords and ladies; but as they had ceased for years to come for even that six weeks in London which consoles country families with a phantasmagoric glimpse of "the world," the town-house had long passed out of their hands. Lord Eskside had spent this dreary week in rooms which overlooked the dreary blank wall of St James's, with its few trees, and the old gravestones inside—not a cheerful sight for an old man whose last hopes seemed to be dying from him. He had employed detectives, had advertised with immense precaution in the newspapers, and himself had wandered about the town, night and day, seeking his boy; while all the time, the few people whom he met when he appeared at rare intervals in such streets as are frequented by anybody worth speaking of, paid him compliments on his grandson's success, and hoped that Val, when he appeared in the House of Commons, would show himself worthy of his race. " I expect him to do us credit," the old lord said,

working his shaggy eyebrows in such a way that his acquaintances thought he had some nervous complaint, and shook their heads, and wondered that "in his state of health" he should be in town alone. What bitter pangs were in his heart when he said these words! The boy had done them credit all his life up to this moment. If it was not the loftiest kind of reputation which Val had acquired, it was yet a kind highly estimated in the world, and which young men prized; and no stain had ever touched that bright young reputation, no shadow of shame ever lighted upon it. And now! These congratulations, which in other circumstances would have been so sweet to him, were gall and bitterness. What if Val had disappeared like his mother, with the same indifference to the claims of life and duty which that undisciplined, uneducated woman had shown? What if, crushed by the revelations so suddenly made to him, he were now—instead of taking the manly way, facing the scandal and living it out—to give in, and fail, and leave his place to be occupied by others? The thought of that election declared void for which he had struggled so stoutly, and of some one else coming in upon Val's ruin, triumphing in his downfall, was sharp as a poisoned sword in the old man's heart. Lady Eskside thought chiefly of the boy himself, and of what he might do in his despair; but the public downfall which seemed imminent, added pangs even more bitter to her husband's sufferings. His adversary had done all that an adversary might; but no adversary could harm Lord Eskside and break his heart as his boy could. The old lord was very strong upon race. It was one of the objects of his fullest faith. He believed not only in the efficacy of being well-born, but extended that privilege far beyond the usual limits allowed to it. He had faith in the race of a ploughman as well as in that of his own noble house. But the blood in the veins of his boy had come from a race of wanderers—a species, indeed, not a race at all—made up by intermixtures of which neither law nor honour took note; and how could he tell that the honest ichor of the Rosses would predominate over the influence of that turbid mixture? Already it was evident enough that the vagabond strain had not lost its power. He had feared it all Val's life, and sternly repressed it from his boyhood up; but repression had now ceased to be possible, and here was the evil in full force.

Lord Eskside had a very distinct ideal of life, and one of his theories was that no man could be a man who was not capable of setting his face hard against difficulty and fighting it out. To flee was a thing impossible to him ; but Valentine had fled, and what but his vagrant blood could be to blame ? It did not occur to the old lord that his own son, in whom there was no vagrant blood, had fled more completely than poor Val—turning his back upon his country, and hiding his shame in unknown regions and unknown duties. Richard's desertion had wounded his father to the quick in its time ; but Val had obliterated Richard, and now he scarcely recollects that previous flight. It never occurred to him to think that Richard's example had put it into the boy's mind to abandon his natural place, and flee before the sudden mortification and downfall. With strange pain, and anxiety deeper than words, he set everything down to the unfortunate mother. Her wild blood—the blood of a creature without reason, incapable of that supreme human faculty of endurance, which was to Lord Eskside one of the highest of qualities—was at the bottom of it all. If he could but find the boy in time to exert his old influence over him, to induce him to make a stand against the coward principle in his mind, to bring him back to his duty ! Lord Eskside thought of Val as an old soldier might think of a descendant who had turned his back upon an enemy. Shame, and love eager to conceal the shame—sharp personal mortification and the sting of wounded pride, battling with tenderness unspeakable, and anxious longing at any cost, at all hazards, to wipe out this stain and inspire the unfortunate to redeem himself : these were the feelings in his mind. The sharpest ingredient in such a cup of bitterness is, that the parent well knows he cannot work out redemption for his boy. No other but the boy himself can do that. Prayers, and tears, and atonements, and concealments, and all the piteous expedients of human love and misery, cannot do it. No man can redeem his brother. The coward must himself prove that he has overcome his cowardice ; the man who has failed must himself turn back the tide of fortune and win. And I do not know anything more pathetic in nature than the brave old hero trying hard to put his own heart of gold into the leaden bosom of some degenerate boy ; or the pure strong woman labouring to inspire with her own white fervent soul some lump of clay that has been given to her—

God knows how—for a daughter. This was how the old lord felt. If he could but put himself, his old steadfast heart, his obdurate courage, his dogged strength of purpose, into the boy! If there was but any way to do it!—transfusion of spirit like that fanciful medical notion of transfusion of blood. Lord Eskside would have given his old veins to be drained—his aged frame to be hacked as any physician pleased—would have had his very heart taken out of his breast had that been possible—to give the best of it to Val; but could not, heaven help us!—could only sit and think what impotent words to say, what arguments to use, when he should find him, to make the boy stand and endure like a man.

He was sitting thus, his head leaning on his hand, his shaggy eyebrows so bent over his eyes that you scarcely could see them glimmer in the caverns below, though there was a painful suffusion in them which glistened when the light caught it. A claret-jug was on the table and a single glass. He had dined late, after being out all day, and was worn out by the sickness of hope deferred, and the heaviness of disappointment. There was a little fire smouldering in the grate, but he had thrown the window open with an irritable impatience of the close small shut-up room. The distant sounds of the streets still came in, though the full tide of traffic was over. There was still a roll and murmur of distant carriages and voices, the hum of that sea which calls itself London. The old lord paid no attention. He was going over ideas which he had pondered again and again, anxiously, but with a certain languor and hopelessness in his heart. If he heard the carriage stop below, the sound of the opening door, he took no notice. What was it to him? Carriages stopped continually all through the evening. People were always coming and going. What could it matter to him—a stranger, alone?

He sat facing the door; it was a habit he had fallen into since he came here—not with any expectation, but only in case—for, to be sure, some visitor might come, some one with news might come, though he did not look for anything. Even the sound of steps and voices coming up-stairs did not excite him, it was so usual. All at once, however, he roused himself. The door was thrown wide open, without any preliminary, and Lady Eskside walked straight in, her old eyes shining, her figure dilating with triumph, like a figure in a

procession. The sight of her startled her husband beyond expression, yet not so much as did the other figure behind her. "You, Catherine, you ? and you've got him !" he cried ; for there was a certain general resemblance in height and form between Dick and Val. "I've got him !" said Lady Eskside, standing aside with that extraordinary air of triumph, to show to her husband the figure of a timid young man, respectful and hesitating, who looked at him with blue eyes, half deprecating, half apologetic. Lord Eskside's heart, which had jumped high, sank down in his breast. He gave but one look at the stranger whom, at first, he had taken for Valentine. "Good Lord ! do you mean to drive me mad ? My lady ! is this what you bring me for Val ?" he cried ; and turned his back upon the new-comer with feverish irritability, feeling the disappointment go to his very heart.

"Oh, my dear, forgive me !" cried Lady Eskside ; "I was not thinking of Val for the moment. Look at him, look at him ! look at the boy again !"

"You were not thinking of Val ? In the name of heaven, who else was there to think of ?" said her husband. He was almost too angry to speak—and so sick with his disappointment, that he could have done something cruel to show it, had the means been in his way.

"Forgive me !" said my lady, putting her hand upon his arm ; "but there's news of Val. I have brought you news of him. He's ill—in his bed with fever ; oh ! when I think of it, I am half frantic to find how long it takes, with all their bonnie railways ! But he's safe. It had been more than he could bear. My poor boy !—he's been ill since the day he left us. What ails you ? what ails you, my old man ?"

"Nothing," he said, fumbling, with his hands clasped, his shaggy eyebrows concealing any gleam of the light underneath, his lips quivering—"nothing." It took him a minute to recover himself, to get over the sudden stilling of the storm within him, and the sudden calm that came after so much trouble. The change seemed to stop his breath, but not painfully, and rolled off loads as of Atlas himself—more than the world—from his shoulders. "Wait a moment," said Lord Eskside, his eyebrows gradually widening ; "what did you say it was ? I did not catch it clearly ; ill, in his bed ?"

" But nothing to be frightened about—nothing to alarm us——"

" I am not alarmed, I am not alarmed !" said the old lord. To tell the truth, he was giddy with the sudden cessation of pain. " There, Catherine ! it's you I ought to think of, after such a journey," he added, quickly coming to himself. " Sit down and rest ; no doubt you're very tired. Ill—in his bed ? Then it's all accounted for ; and God be thanked !" said Lord Eskside. He said this under his breath, and drew a chair close to the smouldering fire, and put his old wife into it, grasping her by both the arms for a moment, which was his nearest approach to an embrace.

" But you have not given a look or a thought to—him I brought with me," said the old lady, grasping him in her turn with a forcible yet tremulous hold.

" Him you've brought with you ?" Lord Eskside turned round with a scowl from under his shaggy eyebrows, which meant no harm, but was one of his devices to conceal emotion. He saw a fair-haired timid young man standing irresolute near the door, evidently very uneasy to find himself there, and not knowing what to do. He had Lady Eskside's shawl on his arm, and a helpless, apologetic, deprecating look on his face. The old lord did not know what to make of him. Was it a new servant, he asked himself for a moment ? But the stranger did not look like a servant. " Here is somebody waiting," he said, in as quiet a tone as possible, for he did not want to show the impatience he felt.

" Is that all you say ?" cried my lady, in keen tones of disappointment. " Oh, look at him—look at him again !"

" Sit down," said the old lord, abruptly. " It is clear Lady Eskside means you to stay, though she is too tired to introduce you. I ask your pardon for not knowing your name. My lady, as you and I have much to say to each other, and the night is far on, could not this business wait ?"

" Oh," cried Lady Eskside with a groan, " is that all—is that all you say ?"

" My lady," said Dick, emboldened to the use of this title by hearing it used by no less a personage than Lord Eskside himself, " I beg your pardon ; but isn't it best for me to go ? I will come back for you in the morning before the train starts. I would rather go, if you don't mind." Dick had never felt himself so entirely out of his element, so painfully *de trop*, in his life. He was not used to this feeling, and it

wounded him mightily—for he, too, had some pride of his own. And he had not come seeking any favour, but rather conferring one, taking a great deal of trouble voluntarily, of his own will, for what was no advantage to him. And then Dick had been made much of these two days—he had found himself elevated into a vague region of mystery, where he met with nothing but kind interested looks, phrases full of meaning which he could not penetrate, but which all tended to make him feel himself of importance. He seemed now for the first time to come down to common life after this curious episode, and the shock was rude. He did not like it; he felt less inclined than usual to put up with anything that was disagreeable. He felt angry even, though he did not wish to show it. What was this old lord to him that he should linger about like a servant, waiting for a word?

“Oh, hush, hush!” said the old lady; “look at him again! You don’t think I would come all this way for nothing—me that have not travelled for years. Look at him—look at him again.”

“Do you call Valentine nothing? or have you gone out of your wits?” said the old lord, pettishly. “I think the young man is very sensible. Let him come back to-morrow. We have plenty to think of and plenty to talk of to-night.”

Lady Eskside was so deeply disappointed that her courage failed her; she was very tired, and so much had happened to take away her strength. The tears came into her eyes, and it was all she could do to keep herself from mere feeble crying in her weakness. “Sit down, Richard,” she said. “Oh, my dear, my dear, this is not like you! Can you see nothing in him to tell the tale? I have it all in my hands. Listen to me: I know where she is; I am going to find her: I can make everything clear. It’s salvation for us all—for Val, God bless him! and for this one——”

“For what one?” cried Lord Eskside hoarsely under his breath.

“Oh!” cried Lady Eskside, almost with violence, thrusting her husband away from her, “can you not see? must I summer it and winter it to you—and can you not see? Richard, my man,” she added, rising up suddenly, and holding out both her hands to Dick, “you’re full of sense, and wiser than I am. Don’t stay here to be stared at, my dear, but go to your bed, and get a good night’s rest. The woman told me there was a room for you. See that you have every-

thing comfortable ; and good night ! We'll go down to my boy in the morning, you and me ; and God bless you, my good lad ! You'll be a comfort to all of us, father and mother, and your grandparents, though they may not have the sense to see. Good night, Richard, my man—good night ! ”

“ What does all this mean, my lady ? ” said Lord Eskside. He had watched her proceedings with growing excitement, impatience, and an uncomfortable sense of something behind which he did not understand. “ You're not a foolish woman to torment me with nonsense at such a moment. What does it mean ? ”

“ If you had ever looked at the boy, you would have seen. It is Richard himself come back,” cried the old lady : “ Richard, not what he is now, as old a man as you and me, and tashed and spotted with the world ; but my son as he was, when he was the joy of our hearts, before this terrible marriage, before anything had happened, when he was just too good, too kind, too stainless—or so at least you said ; for me, I never can see, and never will see,” cried Lady Eskside, indignantly, “ that it is not a man's crown and glory, as well as a woman's, to be pure.”

“ My lady ! my lady ! ” said the old lord. He was walking about the small room in his agitation ; his under lip thrust out, his eyebrows in motion, his hands deep in his pockets. “ What do you mean ? ” he cried. “ Have you any foundation, or is it all another wild fancy about a likeness ? A likeness ! —as if in anything so serious you could trust to that.”

“ Do you mean to tell me you did not see it ? ” she said.

“ Oh, see it ! My lady,” said the old lord, ungenerously, with a snort of contempt, “ you saw a likeness in Val when he came, a dark boy, with eyes like black diamonds, and curly brown hair, to Richard. You said he was his father's image.” The old man ended with an abrupt short laugh. “ Catherine, for heaven's sake, no more fancies ! Have you any foundation ? and the lad not even a gentleman,” he added under his breath.

“ If you go by the clothes and the outside,” cried the old lady, contemptuous in her turn, “ how could he be a gentleman ? That poor creature's son—nothing but a tramp—a tramp ! till the fine nature in him came out, and he stopped his wandering and made a home for his mother. Was that

like a gentleman or not? He's told me everything, poor boy," she went on, her tone melting and softening, "without knowing it—every particular; and I am going to find her to clear it all up. When Val gets well, there shall be no more mystery. We'll take his mother home in the eye of day. She must be a changed woman—a changed woman! He's told me everything in his innocence—how she would sit and watch Val in his boat, but never said a word. God bless her! for she's been faithful to what light she had."

"What is all this you are saying?" said Lord Eskside. He was utterly subdued. He drew a chair close to hers and sat down, humbly putting his hand on her arm. "Catherine, you would not speak to me so if there was not something in it," he said.

The old pair sat up together far into the night. She told him everything she had found out, or thought she had found out; and he told her what he had been doing, and something of the things he had been thinking—not all, for my lady had never had those fears of Val's courage and strength which had undermined the old lord's confidence. But when she told him, weeping and smiling, of the alliance between the two boys, so unwitting of their close relationship, and of the mother's speechless adoration at a distance of the child she had given up, Lord Eskside put his hand over his face, and his old wife, holding his other hand, felt the quiver of emotion run through him, and laid her head upon his shoulder, and wept there; sweet tears! as when they were young and happiness sought that expression, having exhausted all others. "My dear, we'll have to die and leave them soon," she said, sobbing, in his ear.

"Ay, Catherine! but we'll go together, you and me," said the old lord, pressing the hand that had held his for fifty years; and they kissed each other with tremulous lips; for was not the old love, that outlasted both sorrow and joy, more sacred, more tender, than any new?

Dick presented himself next morning in time for the train; but he was not quite like himself. He had been put on the defensive, which is not good even for the sweetest nature. Lady Eskside had bewildered him, he felt, with mysterious speeches which he could not understand—making him, in spite of himself, feel something and somebody, he could not tell why; and by so doing had put him in a false position, and subjected him to unjust slight and remark.

He had not wanted to thrust himself, a stranger, into the interview between my lord and my lady. She had made him follow her against his will, and Dick felt aggrieved. It was not his doing. "Why did she drag me in where I was not wanted?" he said to himself. He was too faithful and loyal not to keep his appointment with her, though the idea of leaving a note and hurrying away to his work did cross his mind. His work, after all, was the thing that was most important. *That* would not deceive him, as the ladies most likely would, old and young, who had established a claim upon Dick's services, he knew not how. What were ladies to him? He must go back to his work. It was with this sentiment clouding his face that he presented himself next morning, having breakfasted half-sulkily by himself. It is hard for the uninitiated to tell which is virtuous melancholy and which is sulkiness, when an early access of that disorder comes on; Dick felt very sad, and did not suspect himself of being sulky; he knocked very formally at the door of Lord Eskside's little sitting-room. The old lord himself, however, came forward to meet him, with a changed countenance. He held out his hand, and looked him in the face with an eager interest, which startled Dick. "Come in, come in," said Lord Eskside; "my lady is getting ready. We are all going together." The old man held his hand fast, though Dick was somewhat reluctant. "I was startled last night, and could not understand you—or rather I could not understand *her*. But you must not bear me any malice," he said, with a strange sort of agitated smile, which was bewildering to the young stranger.

"I don't bear any malice," said Dick, brightening up; "it would not become me; and to you that are—that belong to Mr Ross."

"Yes, I belong to Mr Ross—or Mr Ross to me, it doesn't much matter which," said Lord Eskside. "You'll understand better about that by-and-by; but, Richard, my lady's old, you know, though she has spirit for twenty men. We must take care of her—you and me."

"Surely," said Dick, bewildered; and then my lady herself appeared, and took a hand of both, and looked at them, her bright old eyes shining. "I can even see another likeness in him," she said, looking first at Dick and then at Lord Eskside; and the old lord bent his shaggy eyebrows with a suppressed snort, and shook his head, giving her a look of

warning. "Time enough," he said—"time enough when we are there." Dick went in the same carriage with them, and was not allowed to leave them, though his own idea was that he ought to have travelled with Harding, who had accompanied Lady Eskside; and they talked over him in a strain full of strange allusions, which made him feel that he did not know what was going to happen—speaking of "her" and "them," and giving glances at Dick which were utterly bewildering to him. "Here is a packet Richard left for me, though I have never had the heart to look at it," Lord Eskside said—"the certificate of their birth and baptism." "And that reminds me," said my lady, "where is Richard? did he go to you? did you see him? I would not wonder but he is passing his time in London, thinking little of our anxiety. God send that he may take this news as he ought."

Richard! there was then another Richard, Dick thought. He had been roused, as was natural, by the sound of his own name, but soon perceived, with double bewilderment, that it was not to him, but some other Richard, that the conversation referred.

"You are doing him injustice," said Lord Eskside; "he came yesterday, but I did not see him. I was out wandering about like an old fool. He left the packet and a note for me, and said he was going to Oxford. To be sure, it was to Oxford he said; so we'll see him, and all can be cleared up, as you say, at once."

"To Oxford!" cried Lady Eskside, a sudden pucker coming into her forehead. "I mind now—that was what he said to me too. Now, what could *he* be wanting at Oxford?" said the old lady with an impatient look. She said no more during the journey, but sat looking out from the window with that line of annoyance in her forehead. It felt to her somehow unjustifiable, unnecessary, that Richard should be there, in the way of finding out for himself what she had found out for him. The thought annoyed her. Just as she had got everything into her hands! It was not pleasant to feel that the merest chance, the most trivial incident, a meeting in the streets, a word said, might forestall her. My lady was not pleased with this suggestion. "Talk of your railways," she said—"stop, stopping, every moment, and worrying you to death with waiting. A post-chaise would be there sooner!" cried Lady Eskside.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DICK became in a manner the head of the expedition when the party reached Oxford ; his foot was on his native heath ; he knew where to take the two old people, both of whom became more and more agitated in their different ways, as they approached to the end of their journey. He put them into a cab ; and getting on the box himself, had them driven to the river-side. Lady Eskside grasped her old lord's hand, as they sat there together, jolting through the streets, going to this strangest incident of their lives. She was trembling, though full of resolute strength. The emergency was too much for her nerves, but not for her brave old heart, which beat high with generous courage, yet with a sense of danger not to be despised or overlooked. How was she to meet and master this untamed creature of the wilds ? how secure her that she might not escape again ? and how make the revelation to her son who had got to hate his wife, and to Valentine who knew nothing of his mother ? Lady Eskside, with a mixture of pride and terror, felt that it was all in her own hands. She must do everything. The thought made her tremble ; but it gave her a certain elation which the reader will understand, but which I cannot describe—which was not vanity nor self-importance—but yet a distinct personal pleasure and satisfaction in being thus able to set everything right for her children. I don't doubt that she had some idea that only her own penetrating eye could have made sure of Dick's identity, and only her close questioning could have elicited from him so many certain proofs ; and it seemed so just, so right, such a heavenly recompense for what she had suffered, that to her hands and no other should be given the power of setting all right. Lord Eskside was less excited. He was thinking more of the boy, less of the circumstances in which he was about to find him, and the thrill in his old frame was almost entirely that of natural anxiety to know how Val was. Dick on the box was not without his tremor too. He did not know what his mother would think of this visit—if it would terrify her, if she would think he had been unfaithful to the charge she had laid upon him not to speak of her. He stopped the cab when they reached the river-side ; and, scarcely knowing

what he was about, handed Lady Eskside out. "I'll go round by the back and open the door: that's the house," he said, hoarsely; and left them standing by the edge of the grey Thames, which, still somewhat swollen with spring rains, ran full and swift, sweeping round the eyot with all its willows faintly green, upon which, though they did not know it, poor Val had stranded. The sun was shining brightly, but still the river was grey; and Lady Eskside shivered and trembled with that chill of anxiety and excitement which is more penetrating than cold. "This is where Val brought me," said the old lady, as they walked tremulously to the door. "Yes, yes, I mind it all—and there was a shawl like one of mine upon a table. Yes, yes, yes," she said to herself, almost inarticulate—"my own shawl! Oh, how was it I was so foolish, and did not see at once that it must be *her*; and she had fled out of the place not to see me? It all comes back! She must have known it was me. It's nothing, nothing, my dear! I'm trembling, it's true—how can I help it! But all the time I am steady, steady as a rock; you need not be feared for me."

"I wonder if he is in one of these rooms," said the old lord, looking wistfully at the upper windows. They opened the garden gate, not without difficulty, for they were both very tremulous, and went in to the little garden where there was a pale glow of primroses. There they stood for perhaps a moment looking towards the house, waiting for Dick to open to them, breathless, feeling the great crisis to be near. Lady Eskside clung still to her old lord's arm. He was not a pillar of strength, and shook, too, in his old age and agitation; but there was strength as well as comfort in the mere touch—the sense of standing by each other in those hardest moments, as in all others. As they stood thus waiting, the door opened, and some one came out, walking towards them. He strolled out with one hand in his pocket, with the air of a man issuing forth from his own house. It was not Dick coming to open to them, to admit them. Lady Eskside dropped her husband's arm, and gave a strange cry—a cry of astonishment and confused dismay, half querulous, half violent. Hot tears came rushing to her eyes in the keen disappointment, mingled with wonder, which penetrated her mind. She clasped her hands together almost with a movement of anger—"Richard, *Richard!*" she cried.

He stood for a moment silent, looking at them, confused

too. "My father and my mother," he said to himself under his breath. Then he tried to rally his powers, and put on a smile, and look composed and self-possessed, which he was not; but instead of succeeding in this attempt, grew hot and red, though he was old enough to have been done with such vanities. "This is a very unexpected meeting," he said. "Mother, excuse me if I am startled. Nothing was further from my thoughts than to see you here." Then he stopped short, and made a gulp of agitation and resumed again. "You have heard that Valentine is here? He is just the same; we must wait for the crisis. He is taken good care of—"

"Richard!" said his mother—"oh, none of your pretending to me—for God's sake tell us the truth! Do you know?—or is it by chance you have come here?"

"It will be better to come into the house, my lady," said Lord Eskside.

I scarcely think she heard what he was saying. She put her hand upon her son's arm, grasping him almost harshly. She was too much excited to be able to contain herself. She had forgotten Val, whom the old lord was longing for. "Do you know, or do you not know?" she cried, her voice growing hoarse. Dick, who had come to the door a minute later than Richard, stood upon the threshold looking at them with a wondering countenance. But no one saw or noticed Dick. He saw the old people absorbed with this new personage, whose back was turned to him, and whom he had never seen before. The mystery was thickening, for here now was another in it, and more and more it grew incomprehensible to Dick. His was not one of the spirits that love mystery. He was open as the day, straightforward, downright. His heart sickened at this maze, at all those difficulties, at the new people who had thus come into his life. He stood looking at them painfully with a confusion in all his thoughts which utterly disconcerted and disturbed him. Then he turned abruptly on his heel and went away. Where? To his work; that at least never disappointed nor confused him. No strangers came into it to tangle the threads, to turn it all into chaos. He had heard how Valentine was, and that the crisis had not yet come; and he was half indignant, half sad, in his sense of a disturbance which was wholly unaccountable and unjustifiable. The house was his—Dick's—it did not belong to the stranger who had pre-

ceded him to the door, and was standing there now in colloquy with the old couple, who evidently had forgotten Dick. What right had they to take him up and cast him down—to take possession of his house, which had cost him dear, which was his, and not theirs, as if he were nothing in it? Dick strode away, more hurt, angry, and "put out," than he had ever been in his life. He threw off his Sunday coat (none the better for these railway journeys), and hastily putting on his working-jacket, hurried off to the rafts. There a man could always find something to occupy him—there was honest work, uncomplicated by any bewilderments. He went and thrust himself into it, almost forgetting that he was headman in his anxiety to dislodge all these disturbing questions from his mind, and to feel himself in reality what he was.

"I think," said Richard, not without excitement himself, but trying hard not to show his rapid changes of colour, his breathless heat and agitation, "that my father gives good advice, and that you ought to come into the house, where at least we can talk with quiet and decency. There is no reason why you shouldn't come in," he said, with nervous vehemence, pushing open the door behind him; "or the Queen, for that matter, if she were here. The mistress of it is as spotless as any one of you. That much I may say."

Lady Eskside did not say another word. She grasped her old lord's arm again, and suffered herself to be led into the little parlour, which she had seen before on another occasion, little thinking whose house it was. Her eye, I need not say, was caught at once by the little shawl on the table. She pointed at it hastily to her husband, who stared, totally unaware what it was to which his attention was directed. They put her into an old carved chair, which was one of poor Dick's latest acquisitions before all this wonderful commotion began. Richard, scarcely knowing what he was doing, led the way, introduced them into the strange little room, as a man does when he is in his own house. He had got to feel as if it were his own house. Already he had passed many hours there, feeling himself no intruder. He received his mother and placed her in Dick's easy-chair as he might have received her in the Palazzo Graziani; and the old lady, with her keen eyes, caught at this, though he was as unconscious of it as a man could be.

"You are at home here," she said to him, with keen suspicion—"it's no strange place to you, Richard, though

it's strange, strange, to my old lord and me. What does it mean, man?—what does it mean? Have you known all the time? Have you been keeping it secret to drive us wild? What is it?—what is it you mean?"

"Where is the boy?" said Lord Eskside. "I do not enter into this question between your mother and you. You will satisfy us both, doubtless, about the mystery,—which, as you all well know, is a thing I abhor. Richard," said the old man, with a break in his voice, "I want to see the boy."

"Listen first, sir," said Richard, indignant; "how my mother has found out, I don't know; but she is right. Chance—or Providence, if you like the word better—has thrown Val into his—mother's hands. I guessed it when I saw you at RossCraig, and I came here at once and found it was so—"

"You guessed it? God forgive you, Richard! You've known, then, all the time? you've exposed us and Val to abuse and insult, and maybe killed the lad and broken my old lord's heart. Oh, God forgive you, Richard! is this the way you've done your duty to us and your boy?"

Lady Eskside wrung her hands. Her old face flushed and grew pale; hot tears filled her eyes. Something of personal disappointment was in the pang with which she felt this supposed deception. Women, I fear, are more apt to think of deception than men. Lady Eskside, in the sharpness of her disappointment, rashly jumped to the conclusion that Richard's knowledge was not an affair of yesterday; that there was something behind more than had been told to her; that perhaps, for anything she could tell, he had been visiting this woman, who was his lawful wife, as if the tie between them had been of quite a different character; or perhaps, even—who knows?—was trying to palm upon them as his wife some one who did not possess any right to that title. In suspicion, as in other things, it is the first step that costs the most. Lord Eskside did not go so far as his wife did, but the thought began to penetrate his mind too, that if Richard had known this, even for a day, without disclosing it, he had exposed them to cruel and needless pain.

"Catherine," said the old lord, "we need not quarrel to make matters worse. If he recognises his wife and his other son at last, and it is true that they are here, let us

give our attention to make sure of that, and prevent trouble in the future. It is not a question of feeling, but of law and justice. Yes, no doubt, feeling will come in ; but you cannot change your son, my lady, any more than he can change his father and mother, which, perhaps, he would have little objection to do. We must put up with each other, such as we are."

"You do me injustice, sir," cried Richard ; "both you and my mother. There has been no deception in the matter. You shall hear how it happened afterwards ; but in the meantime it is true that she is here, mother. I met her at Val's bedside two days ago for the first time, without warning. I believe if I had given her warning she would have escaped again—but for Val. I am not made of much account between you," said Richard, with a painful smile. "I have little occasion to be vain. You, my mother, and her, my—wife ; what you think of is not me, but Val."

"Oh Richard ! you would aye have been first with me if you would have let me," said Lady Eskside, as ready to forgive as she had been to censure, her heart melting at this reproach, which was true. As for the old lord, he was not so easily moved either to blame or to pardon. He got up and walked about the room while Richard, still flushed with excitement and a certain indignation, told them the story of the photograph, and his recognition of his wife's face so strangely brought before him by his son. Richard gave his own version of the story, as was natural. He allowed them to perceive the violence of the shock this discovery had given him, without saying very much on the subject ; and described how, though incapable of anything else in the excitement of the moment, he had put force upon himself to make his wife's residence known to his lawyer, and to have a watch kept upon her movements. What he said was perfectly true, with just that gloss which we all put upon our own proceedings, showing them in their best aspect ; and Lady Eskside received it as gospel, taking her son's hand into her own, following every movement of his lips with moist eyes, entering with tender and remorseful sympathy into those hidden sentiments in his mind which she had doubted the existence of, and which, up to this moment, he had never permitted her to see. Her husband, however, walked about the room while the tale went on, listening intent, without losing a word, but not so sympathetically.—

staring hard at Dick's homely ornaments, his bits of carving, his books, all the signs of individuality which were in the place. I don't know that he remarked their merits, though he walked from one to another, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and stared almost fiercely at the carving, with eyes wellnigh hidden under his shaggy brows. He did not say anything while Lady Eskside, weeping and smiling, made her peace with her son. When she cried, "Oh yes, my dear, my dear, I understand!" he only worked his expressive eyebrows, giving no articulate evidence of emotion. "Val is up-stairs, I suppose? I am going to see him," was all he said in the pause after Richard's story concluded. Lord Eskside climbed up the narrow wooden staircase with a shrug of his shoulders. He was not satisfied with his son's story, as his wife had been. He opened one door after another before he found the room in which Val was lying. To see the boy stretched there on the bed, with vacant eyes, half dozing, half waking, but quite unconscious of his visitor, went to the old lord's heart far more than Richard's story had done. "If he had spoken out like a man, this might have been spared," he said to himself; and bent over Val's bed to hide the momentary contortion of his features, which brought the water to his eyes. "My poor lad!" he said, with hidden anguish, scarcely noticing for the first moment the nurse on the other side of the bed. She rose with a sudden dilation of terror in her eyes. She had never seen Lord Eskside, and did not know who he was; but felt by instinct that he had been brought hither by the terrible wave of novel events which was about to sweep over her head, and that he had come to take away from her her boy.

Lord Eskside looked at her across the bed where Val was lying. He made her a low bow, with that courtly politeness which now and then the homely old lord brought forth, like an old patent of nobility. But it was difficult for him to know what to say to her—and she gave him no assistance, standing there with a look of panic which disturbed the still, abstracted dignity of her ordinary aspect. "I am afraid I have startled you," he said, his voice softening. "Don't be alarmed. I am your—husband's father. I am sorry, very sorry, that we never met before."

She made no answer, but only a slight tremulous movement intended for a curtsey; then some sense of the necessi-

ties of her position, struggling with her fright, she said faintly, "He is just the same—on Saturday he'll be better, please God."

"On Saturday he'll be better! God bless you, my dear! You seem sure? How can you be sure?" cried the old lord, with his eyelids all puckered together to hide the moisture within.

She put up her hand with a warning gesture. "Hush," she said; "it makes him restless when he hears a voice"—then a curious, exquisite twilight seemed to melt over her face as if some last reflections of a waning light had caught her, illuminating her for the moment with the tenderest subdued radiance—"except mine," she added in tones so low as to be almost inaudible. The old lord was deeply touched. What with his boy's condition, which was worse than he expected, and this voice of great, subdued, and restrained feeling—emotion that had no object but to conceal itself—all his prejudices floated away. He was not in the least conscious of being affected by the beauty which was concealed, too, like the emotion—indeed he would have denied that she had any beauty; but the suppression of both and ignoring of them by their possessor had a great effect upon him; for there was nothing in the world more noble in the eyes of the old Scots lord than this power of self-restraint. He went round to her softly, walking with elaborate precaution, and took her hand for a moment; "God bless you!" he said; then, with another look at Val, he left the room. He himself, even with all the self-control he had, might have broken down and betrayed the passionate love and anxiety in him had he waited longer there.

Lady Eskside was seated in the parlour alone when he entered; she was leaning back in Dick's great chair, with her handkerchief to her eyes. "He has gone to get the doctor, that we may know everything exactly," she said. "He" had changed to her. She had taken back her own son, her very child, into her heart, (had he not the best right?) and it was Richard who was "he," not any one else. She was so tender, so happy, so deeply moved by this revolution, that she could scarcely speak to her husband, who, she felt instinctively, had not been subjected to the same wonderful change.

"I have just seen him—and his mother," said Lord Eskside.

"Seen *him*—the boy? Oh my poor Val!" cried the old lady, weeping; and then she raised her hands and turned to her husband with something which was half an apology and half a reproach. "I feel as if I had got my Richard back—our own boy—and I don't seem able to think of anything else—not even Val."

Lord Eskside took another turn round the little parlour. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, my lady," he said; "but if Richard had had the sense to write to you or me when he wrote to that fine London solicitor of his, all this might have been spared. Sandy Pringle's miserable letter, and all that stramash about the election, and my poor Val's fever—maybe his life—"

"His life! his life!" she said, starting up in alarm from her chair.

"Who can say? It's in God's hands, not ours. His mother says he'll be better on Saturday," Lord Eskside said, turning away.

Meanwhile Dick had thrown himself with a certain passion into his work, feeling a curious reluctance which he had never experienced before to receive the orders of the customers, and to run hither and thither launching boats into the water, drawing them up again, dealing out oars and cushions as he had done for years. If he could have pushed out on the stream himself as Val had done, if he could have rowed a race for life or death with some rival oar, that would have calmed him more than anything. Gentlemen like Val, Lord Eskside's heir, future possessor of all those lovely woods, and of the grey old house full of beautiful things, which was so fresh in Dick's memory, could afford to calm themselves down in that way. But Dick, who was only a working man, could not afford it. To him his work was everything, and to that alone, when all his nerves were tingling, could he resort to bring him down again from any fanciful strain of emotion. He ought to be glad to have it to do, Dick felt; for had he been idle, it seemed to him that the beating of his heart would have driven him wild. Now, let it swell as it would, he had enough to do to keep him occupied, and no time to think, heaven be praised! It was, as it happened fortunately, a very busy day. Dick forgot his dinner-hour—forgot everything but the necessity for exertion to keep him from himself. Sometimes he ordered his subordinates about almost fiercely, speaking to them as

he had never been heard to speak before. Sometimes, not thinking, he would rush himself to do their work, while they stood by astonished, with a manner so unusual that no one knew what to make of him. Was it possible that the fever was "catching," and that Dick too was going to have it?

But it was a very busy day, and there was plenty of work for everybody, which is a thing that stops speculation. In the afternoon Lord Eskside, straying about the place, found himself on the rafts. He had not intended to go there, nor did he know when he got there what he wanted. The old lord was very restless, anxious, and unhappy. He could do nothing indoors—not even keep still and out of the way, which is the first duty of man in a house where sickness is; and the unfamiliar place did not tempt him to walk as he might have done at home. He had done what he could to occupy himself after the brief interview with the doctor, who could say nothing more than had already been said, that no change could come until Saturday, when, for good or evil, the crisis might be looked for. After this Lord Eskside went to the hotel where Richard was living, and engaged rooms, and did what he could for the comfort of his wife, who had come here in her old age without any attendant. But when this slender business was accomplished, he had nothing further to do. He could not keep indoors in Dick's little parlour, which they had taken possession of, none of them reflecting that there was another proprietor whose leave had not been asked or given; nor could he linger at the outer door, where Harding hung about in attendance. The old lord had no heart to say anything to Harding; he went to the rafts at last in simple restlessness, having, I almost think, forgotten all about Dick. I suppose it diverted him for the moment from his own heavy thoughts and painful tension of suspense, to see the movement in this busy place—the coming and going—the boats run out into the stream with a pleasant rustle—the slim outriggers now and then carried back all wet and dripping to the boathouses, as one party after another came in. The stir of indifferent cheerful life, going on carelessly all the same under the eyes of a spectator paralysed by anxiety and distress, has a curious bewildering effect upon the mind. He had been there for some minutes before he even noticed Dick's presence at all.

He perceived him at last with a thrill of surprise. Dick had transmogrified himself ; in his working dress he looked more "a gentleman" than he had done in his Sunday coat. He had a straw hat instead of the black one, a blue flannel coat, and noiseless white boating shoes. The excitement against which he was struggling gave a double animation to his aspect, and made him hold himself more erect than usual, with all the energy of wounded pride. Lord Eskside felt that it must be some consciousness of his true position that gave to Dick's youthful figure that air of superiority which certainly he had not noticed in him before ; but it was in reality a contrary influence, the determination to show that he held his own natural position unaffected by all the mysterious hints he had listened to, and found in his work a blessed refuge from the mystery which he did not understand, but was impatient of, and despised. Dick passed Lord Eskside over and over again, in his manifold occupations, touching his hat, as he did so, but taking no further notice of his travelling companion. The old lord, on his side, made no demonstration of interest ; but he took up a position on the edge of the wharf, and followed the young fellow with his eyes. Dick had pushed back his hat, showing his fair locks and open face ; he was never still for a moment, darting hither and thither with lithe light frame, and feet that scarcely seemed to touch the boards. How workmanlike he was, in his element, knowing exactly what to do, and how to direct the others who looked to him ! and yet, Lord Eskside thought, so unlike any one else, so free in his step, so bold in his tranquil confidence, so much above the level of the others. He sat down on a bench close by, and knitting his heavy brows, sat intent upon that one figure, watching him more and more closely. There were a great many boating men about, for it was just the opening of the season, and some of them were impatient, and none were especially disposed to respect the feelings even of the head man at Styles's. "Here, you, Brown," said one young man in flannel ; "Brown, I say ! Can't the fellow hear ? Are we to wait all day ?" "Look alive, can't you ?" shouted a second ; "he's not half the handy fellow he was." "Spoilt by the undergrads," said another ; "he's the pet of all the Eton men." "Brown, Brown ! By Jove ! I'll speak to Styles if this goes on. You, Dick ! can't you hear ?"

I don't know if Dick felt any annoyance at their impatient outcries, or resented such an address in Lord Eskside's presence. But he came to the call, as was his duty, his cheeks a little flushed, but ready to do whatever was wanted of him. "Here, Brown," said the boating man, carelessly; but he never ended his order. For, before another word could be said, Lord Eskside, glooming, with knitted brows, came hurriedly up to Dick, and put his arm through his. "This is no occupation for you," said the old lord. "It is time that this was over;" and before the eyes of the astonished lookers-on, he led him away, too much astonished for the moment to resist. "Who is the old fellow?" asked the boating men; and when (for rank will out, like murder) it was whispered who "Brown's friend" was, a sudden awe fell upon the rafts. A lord! and he had put his arm familiarly into Dick Brown's, and carried him off, declaring this to be no work for him! What could it mean? The effect produced by Val's accident was nothing to the ferment which rose, up and down the river-side, when it was known that a lord—an old lord—not one of your wild undergrads—had walked off Styles's raft, in broad daylight, arm-in-arm with Dick Brown.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

VIOLET went back to Edinburgh the day after her meeting in the woods with Dick. Her heart was so full of what she had heard, that it was all she could do to keep the particulars from old Jean, who was her guardian and companion when, in her trouble, poor child, she managed to escape for a day or two to the Hewan. By a strong effort she kept from talking over the details with her homely old friend; but she could not keep from her the fact that Val was ill. I need not say that Jean knew well enough that there was "something wrong" between the two families—a thing she had been aware of, with the curious instinct which all our servants possess—almost before they knew it themselves. And by this time, of course, Jean knew all that popular opinion said about Mr Pringle's supposed

guilt in respect to the election ; and she was aware that there had been painful scenes in the house, and that neither his wife, nor his sons, nor his daughter "held with" the unlucky culprit, who, since the election, had gone about with drooping head "as if he was gaun to be hanged," old Jean said. Jean was very much shocked and distressed when she heard of Val's illness. "I thought there was something out o' the ordinary," she said ; "him away when there was yon grand dinner, and a strange look about the house a' thegither. Ye may aye ken when the family's in trouble by the look o' the house. Poor callant ! there's nae-thing like trouble of mind for bringing on thae fevers ; you may take my word, Miss Violet, it's something about that weary election. Eh, what creatures men are ! Can they no fecht fair, and take their neives to ane anither, instead of casting up auld ill stories ? They say that's women's way ; for my part, I'm of the opinion that if women are ill with their tongues, men are waur."

"But fevers are not brought on by trouble of mind," said Violet, endeavouring to argue against her own inmost convictions. "Fevers are brought on by—oh, by very different things, by bad air, and—— you may read it all in the papers—— Oh, I hope, I hope it is not that, Jean !"

"If you put your faith in the papers," said Jean, contemptuously, "that say one thing the day, and another the morn, just as it suits them ! Oh ay, they'll tell you an honest midden is waur than an ill story, that creeps into the heart and saps the strength. I'm fond o' the fresh air mysel. We're used to it here up at the Hewan, and it's like meat and drink ; but if some ill-wisher was to rake up a nasty story about my auld man that's in heaven, or my John, what do you think would harm me maist, Miss Vi'let—that, or a' the ill smells in Lasswade ? and I'll no say but what that corner by the smiddy is like to knock you down—though Marion Miller's bairns, so far as I can see, are no a prin the waur."

Violet did not venture upon any reply, for, indeed, it seemed to her innocent soul that mental causes were far more likely to make one ill than those vulgar evils upon which the newspapers insisted. For her own part, she felt very sure, as old Jean did, that Val's illness arose from the misery and excitement of the election, and not from any lesser cause. I suppose this was quite foolish, and that the poor

young member for Eskshire must have gone into some cottage, or passed by some drain in the course of his canvassing, which was the real occasion of his fever. My ignorance is too great on such subjects to warrant me in venturing the supposition that the other part of him, that mental part so much discredited and put out of court in the present day—the one thing about us which nobody can quite account for—had anything to do with it. But Violet and old Jean, both of them as ignorant as myself though more courageous—and both convinced in their different ways that this special development of protoplasm called by ignorant persons their mind, is the most important part of us—unhesitatingly ignored the drain, which no doubt did the mischief, and set down Val's fever to his misery with all the evident precision of cause and effect. Violet could not say any more to the old woman whose remarks she neither dared to be sympathetic with or irritated by, since either demonstration would have betrayed her father, who had done it all. So she hurried home next morning, attended by her maid, breathless till she reached the mother, the natural receiver of all her plaints and troubles. Mrs Pringle saw there was something to tell from the first glance at Violet's countenance, in which all her emotions writ themselves easily to the accustomed eye. She sent her up-stairs to "take off her things," and followed her, hoping that old Lady Eskside might perhaps have met the child somewhere, and melted towards her, the only imaginable way in which any renewal of friendship could be possible. When she heard what it was, however, Mrs Pringle shook her head. "My dear," she said, "you are letting your feelings run away with you. Men don't get ill and take fevers from excitement except in novels. No doubt there must be something wrong about Rosscraig ; these old houses are never quite to be depended upon. God knows that letter has done you and me harm enough, more harm than it could do to Valentine—but we have taken no fever. I am very sorry for him, poor fellow ; but he's young, and has a good constitution—no doubt he'll pull through ; and my Vi must not cry like this for a man that is nothing to her," the good mother said, proudly—putting her handkerchief and her hand, which was still softer, across Violet's streaming eyes to stop her tears.

"Oh, mamma, how can I help it ?" sobbed poor Vi.

"My darling, you must help it. I am not saying it will

be easy. Me myself, with children of my own that take up my mind, I find myself thinking of that poor boy when I have plenty other things to think of. Ah, Violet, you kiss me for that! but, my dear, ask yourself—after what has come and gone—how could it ever, ever be?"

"No one wants it to be!" said Violet, with one of her vehement impulses of maiden pride, raising her head from her mother's shoulder with a hot angry flush covering her face; "but one does not cease—to take an interest—in one's—friend, because of any quarrel. I am friends with him for ever, whatever happens. No one can say anything against that. And we are cousins, whatever happens. I told Mr Brown so."

Mrs Pringle shook her head over the friendship and cousinship which continued to take so warm "an interest" in Val; but she was wise and made no further remark. "I wonder who this Mr Brown may be?" was all she said, and instantly set her wits to work to find something for Violet to do. In a house where there were so many boys this was not difficult; and it cannot be questioned that at this crisis of her young existence the Hewan would have been a much less safe residence for Violet than Moray Place.

The next two days were each made memorable by a note from Dick. These missives were couched almost in the same words, and Violet, reading them over and over again, could extract nothing from them more than met the eye. Dick, in a very careful handwriting, too neat perhaps, and legible, wrote as follows:—

"MADAM,—Mr Ross is just the same. This is not to be wondered at, as I told Miss Violet that there could be no change till Saturday. With your permission I will write again to-morrow.—Your obedient servant,

"RICHARD BROWN."

Even Mrs Pringle could find nothing to remark upon in this brief epistle. "I wonder how he knows your name?" was all she said, and Violet did not feel it necessary to enter into any particulars on this point. The second bulletin was just like the first. Mrs Pringle had this note in her pocket in the evening after dinner when her husband came up to her with an excited look, and thrust the little local Eskside paper, the 'Castleton Herald,' into her hand.

“Look at this!” he said, pointing out a paragraph to her with a hand that trembled. How glad she was then that the news conveyed no shock to her, and that Violet knew with certainty the state of the matter which the newspaper unfolded so mysteriously! “We regret to learn,” said the ‘Herald,’ “that the new member for the county, Mr Ross, whose election so very lately occupied our pages, lies dangerously ill in England of fever—we suppose of that typhoid type which has lately made so much havoc in the world, and threatened still greater havoc than it has made. We have no information as to how the disease was contracted, but in the meantime Lasswade and the neighbourhood have been thrown into alarm and gloom by the sudden departure of such members of the noble family of Eskside as were still remaining at Rosscraig. We trust before our next week’s issue to be able to give a better account of Mr Ross’s state.”

“I knew Val was ill,” said Mrs Pringle, composedly; “Violet heard of it at Eskside.” She could not refrain from a stroke of vengeance as she handed the paper back to him. “I hope you are satisfied with your handiwork now,” she said.

“My handiwork?”

“Just yours,” said Mrs Pringle—“just yours, Alexander; and if the boy should die—which as good as him have done—what will your feelings be?”

“My feelings!” said Mr Pringle; “what have I to do with it?—did I give him his fever? Of course it must have been bad air or some blood-poisoning—or something. These are the only ways in which fever communicates itself;” but as he spoke (for he was not a bad man) his lips quivered, and there was a tremor in his voice.

“It is easy to say that—very easy to say it—and it may be true; but if you take the heart and strength out of a man, and leave him no power to throw off the ill thing when it comes? Alexander,” said Mrs Pringle, solemnly, “I will never hold up my head again in this world if anything happens to Val!”

“You speak like a fool—or a woman! It comes to much the same thing,” cried her husband; and he went away down-stairs and shut himself into his library quivering with the hot sudden rage which belongs to his conscience-stricken state. How miserable he was, trying to study a case in which he had to speak next day, and able to understand

nothing except that Valentine Ross was ill, perhaps dying, and through his means ! He had never meant that. He had meant to have his revenge for an imaginary wrong, and many little imaginary slights, and perhaps to make his young supplanter lose his election ; but that he might put Val's life in danger or injure him seriously had never entered into Mr Pringle's thoughts. He tried to persuade himself that it was no concern of his, pursuing in an undercurrent, as his eyes went over his law-papers, all the arguments about sanitary dangers he had ever read. "What a fool I am to think *that* could have had anything to do with it !" he cried, throwing away his papers when he could bear it no longer, and beginning to pace up and down his room. What a burning restless pain he had at his heart ! He cast about him vaguely in a kind of blank hopelessness what he could do, or if he could do anything. This he had never meant. He would not (he said to himself) have hurt Val or any one, for all the Eskside estates ten times over ; and if anything happened to the boy he could never hold up his head again, as his wife said.

Mr Pringle had been wretched enough since that miserable election day. He had been conscious that even his own friends looked coldly upon him, suspecting him of something which went too far for ordinary political animosity or the fair fighting of honourable contest ; and feeling that his own very family, and even the wife of his bosom, were against him, though Mrs Pringle, after her first very full and indignant expression of her opinion, had said no more on the subject. Still he had not her moral support, a backing which had scarcely ever failed him before ; and he had the sense of having broken all the ties of friendship with the Eskside family—old ties which, though he did not love the Rosses, it was painful altogether to break. He had thrown away those ties, and made his adversaries bitter and his friends suspicious. So little was Mr Pringle a bad man, that he had pursued these thoughts for a long time in his secret heart without recollecting that, should Valentine die, he would be reinstalled in his position as heir-presumptive. When this suddenly flashed upon him, he threw himself in his chair and covered his face with his hands. In that case it would be murder, mere murder ! it would be as if he had killed the boy for the sake of his inheritance. This startled him beyond anything I can say. Perhaps the profoundest

and most impassioned of all the prayers that were said that night for Val's recovery rose in a sudden anguish of remorse and surprised guilt from the heart of Val's enemy. He shook like a man struck with palsy ; his nerves contracted ; the veins stood out on his forehead. He had never meant to harm the boy—never, never, God knows !—except in some momentary way, by a little shame, a little disappointment, which could have made no real difference in so happy and prosperous a life. The pain of this thought gripped him as with the crushing grasp of a giant. What could he do, he said to himself, writhing in his chair—what could he do to make amends ? If he could but have believed in pilgrimages, how gladly would he have set out bare-footed to any shrine, if that would have brought back the young life that was in danger ! Heaven help him ! of all the people concerned there was no one so entirely to be pitied as poor Mr Pringle, lying there prostrate in his chair without any strength left in him, bodily or mental, or any one to back him up, saying to himself that perhaps it might be that he had murdered Val. He seemed to see before his eyes the bold handsome boy, the fine young fellow all joyous and triumphant in the glory of his youth ; and was it his hand—a man with children of his own whom he loved—that had stricken Valentine down ?

Next day—next “lawful day,” as we say in Scotland, for a Sunday intervened—Mr Pringle broke down in his case before the courts, and looked so distracted and miserable that the very Lords of Session took notice of it. “Sandy Pringle is breaking up early,” Lord Birkhill said to Lord Caldergrange ; “he never had any constitution to speak of.” “Perhaps it is family affection and anxiety about young Ross of Eskside,” said Lord Caldergrange to Lord Birkhill ; and these two learned authorities, both old enough to have been Sandy Pringle's father, chuckled and took snuff together over his family affection and his early breakdown. The news from the ‘Castleton Herald’ about Val's illness was copied that morning into all the Edinburgh papers. Mr Pringle himself, being of the Liberal party, saw only the ‘Scotsman,’ where it was simply repeated ; but when he was leaving the Parliament House, his son Sandy came to him with the ‘Courant,’ which, as everybody knows, is the Conservative paper,—the one in which a *communiqué* from the Eskside party would naturally appear. “Have you seen

this, sir?" said Sandy, not, his father thought, without a glimmer of vindictive satisfaction. They were all against him, wife and children, friends and circumstances. But the paragraph in the 'Courant' was one of a very startling description, and had already woke up the half of Edinburgh—everybody who knew or professed to know anything of the Eskside family—to wonder and interest. The 'Courant' gave first the paragraph from the 'Herald,' then added another of its own. "We are glad to be able to add that more favourable news has been received this morning of Mr Ross's condition. The crisis of the fever is now past, and all the symptoms, we understand, are hopeful." Then came the further information, which took away everybody's breath. "We are authorised to state," said the 'Courant,' "that Mr Ross, whose severe illness at such an interesting juncture of his life has called forth so much public interest and sympathy, was fortunately at the house of his mother, the Hon. Mrs Richard Ross, in Oxford, when the first symptoms of fever made their appearance, and accordingly had from the first every medical attention, as well as the most devoted nursing which affection could give."

The paper fell out of Mr Pringle's hand when he had read this. Sandy grasped him by the arm, thinking he would have fallen too. "For heaven's sake," cried Sandy, in a fierce whisper, "don't make an exhibition of yourself *here*!" Mr Pringle did not answer a word, not even to the apologies with which, when they were safe out of the crowded precincts of the Parliament House, his son followed these hasty unfilial words. He went home to Moray Place in a condition of mind impossible to describe, feeling himself like a man caught in a snare. The Hon. Mrs Richard Ross, his mother! Had he really read those words in black and white? Were they no fiction, but true? His heart was relieved a little, for Val was better; but how could he ever extricate himself from the labyrinth he had got into? He had defied the Rosses to produce this mother, and her appearance seemed to Mr Pringle to close up every place of repentance for him, and to put him so terribly in the wrong that he could never face his friends again, or the public which knew him to be the author of that fatal letter to the electors of Eskshire. Surely no sin ever had such condign and instantaneous punishment. He was not a murderer, that was a thing to be thankful for; but he could be proved a liar—a maker of

cruel, unfounded statements—a reporter of scandals! He shut himself up in his library, making some pretence of work to be done. As for Sandy, he did not go in at all, being angry and unhappy about the whole business. That Valentine's mother should be found, and his rights, which Sandy had never doubted, fully established, he was heartily glad of. Mrs Pringle's wise training had saved Sandy from even a shadow of that folly of expectation which had so painfully affected his father; but Sandy was indignant beyond description, hurt in his pride, and mortified to the heart, that his father should have put himself in such a mean position. I do not think there was any tingling recollection in him of the blow Val had given him. If he had borne malice, it would have vanished utterly at the first mention of Val's illness; but he did not bear any malice. He bore another burden, however, more heavy—the burden of shame for his father's unwarrantable assault, which, out of respect for his father, he could not openly disown, but must share the disgrace of, though he loathed the offence. I think Sandy may be excused if he felt himself too cross, too wretched in his false position, to face the rest of the household, and convey to them this startling news.

They had, however, their news too, scarcely less startling. It was the Monday after the Saturday on which Val had passed the crisis of his fever, and Sunday had been very trying to these two women in its entire cessation of news, as Sunday so often is in cases of anxiety. When Dick's letter at last came, there was something in it which they scarcely noticed in their first agitation of joy, but which, by dint of much reading, came out very strongly at last to their puzzled perceptions. There was an indescribable indefinite change in their correspondent's style. But the reader shall judge for himself what this was.

“DEAR MADAM,—I am happy to be able to tell you that the crisis is over, and Valentine is decidedly better. Perhaps you are aware that all the family are here. He has recognised us all, and, though weak, will soon regain his strength, the doctor thinks. Other things have happened, of a very wonderful kind, which I can scarcely write about; but I hope it may now be possible that I may one day see you, and explain everything to Miss Violet which she may wish to know. I do not like to run the risk of agitating Valen-

tine by telling him that I am writing, but, if you will permit me, I will write again ; and I hope you will always be so very kind as to think of me, whatever may be the change in circumstances, as yours and Miss Violet's obedient servant,

“ RICHARD.”

“ What does it mean ? ” said Mrs Pringle. “ I am afraid the young man is taking too much upon himself. To sign himself just ‘ Richard ’ to you and me, is a piece of presumption, Vi ; and to call Lord Eskside’s grandson ‘ Valentine ! ’ I am not bigoted about rank, as you know ; but this is too much.”

Violet was confounded too. “ Perhaps in nursing he has got familiar without knowing it,” she said. “ Oh, mamma, you could not think he was presumptuous if you had seen Mr Brown.”

“ That is all very well, my dear,” said Mrs Pringle. “ I believe he is a good young man ; but perhaps it was a little rash to take him into your confidence. I think I heard your papa come in. Go and see if he is in the library. It might be a comfort to him to know that Val is better. Go ; and if you see an opportunity, tell him. Say I have had a letter ; - that is all that it is needful to say.”

Violet, though reluctant, obeyed ; and Mrs Pringle read Dick’s letter again, not knowing what to make of it. What did he mean by signing himself “ Richard ” ? and calling Val by his Christian name ? Her conclusion was, that this boatman, in whom Violet had so rashly put confidence, was presuming upon the girl’s openness and innocence. Mrs Pringle thanked heaven that her child “ had the sense ” to ask him to write to her mother, who was quite safe, and quite able to manage any presuming person. She could not make up her mind about this, feeling an uneasy consciousness in the letter of something unexplained, something more than met the eye, to which, however, she had no clue ; but she resolved, at least, that this young man should have no further encouragement ; that she would herself write to him, thanking him for his communication, and politely dropping him, as a woman of Mrs Pringle’s age and condition knows how to do. Perhaps it had been imprudent of Violet to refer to him at all ; but happily it was an imprudence of which no further harm need come.

Meanwhile Violet went down-stairs to the library, some-

what tremulous, and half afraid of the morose tones and look into which of late her father had fallen. When she went in, he snatched up some of his papers, and pretended to be studying them very closely ; the 'Courant' lay at his side upon the writing-table ; but it was the law-papers, and not the 'Courant,' which Mr Pringle pretended to read. Violet made a shy circle round the table, not knowing if she might venture to speak. Her courage failed her, until she suddenly remarked, underneath the shadow of the hand which supported his head, that her father was watching her, and that his face was very grey and pallid in the noonday light. This gave her resolution enough to conquer her timidity. She went up to him, and put her hand softly on his shoulder.

"Papa," she said, "I came to tell you that Valentine is better to-day. Mamma has just had a letter——"

"I know he is better," said Mr Pringle, with a sigh ; and then he pointed out to her the notice in the paper. "He is better ; but there is more behind—more than we know."

Vi read the paragraph wondering. It did not affect her except with surprise. "His mother ?" she said ; "I never knew——" and then she bethought herself suddenly of all that had passed, and of that fatal attack upon Valentine which had (no doubt) brought on his fever, and which threatened to separate him from her for ever. "Oh, papa !" she cried suddenly, with a flash from her eyes which seemed to scorch the culprit like a gleam of angry yet harmless lightning ; then she added, looking at him fixedly, with indignant firmness : "But you are glad of this ? glad he is better ? glad his mother is found, and that everything will go well ?"

Mr Pringle paused a moment looking at her. He was afraid to contradict her. He answered hurriedly, half servilely : "Yes, yes—I'm glad ;" then, with a groan—"Vi, I am made a fool of. I am proved a poor, mean, paltry liar ; that was never what I meant to be. Perhaps I said more than was right ; but it was for justice, Vi—yes, it was for justice, though you may not believe what I say."

If you consider all that Violet had suffered, you will perceive how hard it was for her all at once to look upon this question impartially, to believe what her father said. She turned away her head from him in natural resentment.

Then her tender heart was touched by the tones of wretchedness in his voice.

"Yes," he said, getting up from his chair, "you may think it was all ill feeling—and so many think; but it was for justice too. And now, apparently, things are turning out as I never expected. I did not believe in this woman, and God knows whether it may not be a cheat still. But if this is true that they are bold enough to put in the newspaper, then," said Mr Pringle, with a groan, "I'm in the wrong, my dear—I am in the wrong, and I don't know what to do."

He sank down again, leaning his head on the table, and hiding his face in his hands. Vi's heart melted altogether. She put her soft arm round his neck, and bent down her head upon his. She did not feel the bitterness of being in the wrong. It seemed to her innocent soul that there was so easy a way to shake off that burden. She clasped her father round the neck and whispered consolation. "Papa, dear! you have nothing to do but to say this to them. Oh, what makes you think you don't know what to do? Say you were wrong, and that you are sorry! One is so certain that this must be the right thing."

He shook her away not unkindly but with a little impatience. "You don't know—you are too young to know," he said.

"Papa, can there be any doubt?" said Violet, in the majesty of her innocence. "When one has done wrong, one undoes it, one confesses that it was wicked. What else? Is it not the first lesson one learns in life?" said the girl, serene in perfect certainty, and sadly superior to her age, in what she considered her experience of that existence of which she already knew the sorrows. She stood over him as grave and sweet as an angel, and spoke with entire and childlike confidence in her abstract code. "We all may be wrong," said Violet, "the best of us; but when we find it out we must say so, and ask pardon of God and of those whom we have wronged, papa. Is there any other way?"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

OF all the persons involved at this crisis, I think the most to be sympathised with was honest Dick, who wrote the letter over which Mrs Pringle pondered out of such a maze and confusion of feeling as seldom arises without personal guilt in any mind. From his very first glimpse of the new personage introduced into his little world—the stranger who had suddenly appeared to him when he went to open his own door to Lady Eskside, standing between him and her, anticipating and forestalling him—a glimmering instinctive knowledge who this stranger was had flashed into Dick's mind. Already the reader is aware he had thought it probable that Valentine's father was also his own father, and had endeavoured to account to himself for his mother's strange behaviour on this score. I cannot quite describe the feelings with which Dick, with his tramp-traditions, regarded such a supposed father. What could "the gentleman," who had been his mother's lover, be to him? Nothing, or less than nothing—not "the author of his being," as our pious grandfathers used to say; but something much more like an enemy, a being half malignant, half insulting, with whom he had nothing to do, and towards whom his feelings, if not those of mere indifference, would be feelings of repulsion and instinctive dislike. He felt no shame on his mother's account or his own; but for the other who had left that mother and himself to take their chance in the woods or on the streets, he was ashamed of his connection with him, and felt mortified and humbled by the mere suggestion of his existence. So long as he kept out of the way, Dick could refrain from thinking of this unknown parent; but the moment he appeared, he woke a hundred lively emotions in the bosom of his son. Dislike, annoyance, a sense of pride injured, and secret humiliation, came to him at the first glance of Richard Ross. This was his feeling before any hint of the real state of affairs had reached him. The old lord had not made the disclosure that first day, but waited until the crisis of Valentine's fever was over. Then he called to Dick to go out with him, and there, on the bank of that river which had witnessed all the changes in his fortune, this last and most extraordinary change was

revealed to the bewildered young man. Dick's mind was already excited by the painful interval of suspense which had occurred ; and when this revelation was made to him, the confusion in his thoughts was indescribable. That he was Valentine's brother—not secretly and guiltily, but in the eye of day—that the great house which he had looked upon with so much awe and admiration was his home—that all the accessories and all the realities of wealth and rank were his, actually his—relatives, connections, leisure, money, luxury,—was more than he could understand. He did not believe it at first. He thought the old lord had gone mad, that he had been seized with some sudden frenzy, that he had altogether misconceived the relationship between his son, the gentleman whom Dick disliked and suspected of being his father, and the poor lad who never had known what a father was. “I think I know what you mean. I had got to suppose he was my father for some time,” said Dick, bluntly, “but not in that way. You are mistaken, sir ; surely you are mistaken.”

“How could I be mistaken ? are there more ways of being your father than one ?” said the old lord, half amused by the lad's incredulity. Dick shook his head ; he was better informed than Lord Eskside, who was so much his senior. He knew things which it was impossible the other could know—but how was he to say them ? It did not occur to him even now that there was any relationship between the father of Richard Ross and himself, even though he was prepared to believe that he himself was Richard Ross's son.

“I don't understand you, any more than you understand me,” said Lord Eskside, “and I don't wonder that you're confounded ; but, nevertheless, what I have told you is true. I am your grandfather, Dick. Ah, that takes you by surprise ? Now, why, I would like to know ? since you believe my son is your father, though ‘not in that way’—”

“My lord,” said Dick, “I beg your pardon ; but there's ways of being a man's son without being anything to his relations, and that's what I am thinking of. In my class we understand that such things are—though perhaps they oughtn't to be.”

“But, you gomeral, you belong to my class, and not to your own !” said the old lord, feeling, with a mixture of pain and amusement and impatience, his own ignorance before the superior and melancholy knowledge of life pos-

sessed by this boy. "What must I say to convince you? You are Valentine's twin brother; do you not see what that means? and can you suppose that anything in the world but a boy's mother would nurse Val as that woman is doing? —besides, he's her living picture," said Lord Eskside, abruptly, and not without a grudge. He said it to convince this boy, who was a genuine Ross, without dispute or doubt; but even now it gave him a pang to acknowledge that his Val was like the tramp-mother, and not like the noble race of which his father came.

Dick stopped short, and put out his hand blindly as if to save himself from falling. This was a new view of the subject altogether. He could understand the relationship through the father; but—his mother! Valentine! What did it all mean? He caught his breath, and something like a sob came from his breast "I can't understand it—I can't understand it!" he cried, feeling choked as well as blinded; air failing him, sight failing him, and the whole steady earth turning round and round. When he recovered himself a little he turned to Lord Eskside, who was watching him closely from under his shaggy eyebrows. "Don't say anything more, sir," he cried with an effort which was almost piteous. "Let me try to make it out—I can't all at once."

"Go home, my lad," said the old lord, kindly patting him on the shoulder, "and think it out at your leisure."

"Thank you, sir—thank you," cried Dick; and he turned back without another word, and hurried to his little bedroom, which was next door to the one in which Valentine lay. Ought he to have been overwhelmed with delight and joy? Instead of being a nobody, Dick Brown, Styles's head-man, he was Richard Ross, Lord Eskside's grandson, a person of importance, the son of a future baron; superior to all his old surroundings, even to most of his old patrons. But Dick was not glad at first, not even when he had fully realised this wonderful news, and allowed to himself that, Lord Eskside having told it, it must be true. He had found a family, a name, a position in the world; but he seemed to have lost himself. He sat down on his bed in the small room which he had himself furnished with a hundred little graces and conveniences, and of which a week ago he had been proud, and covered his face with his hands. But for his manhood, he could have sobbed over this extraordinary break and stop in his life; and at the first he was no more able to reconcile him-

self to being Dick Brown no' longer, than Mr Richard Ross would have been able to reconcile himself to descending into the place of Styles's head-man ! The change was as great one way as another ; indeed I think the higher might have been better able to come down than the lower, who did not understand how he was to mount up, and in whose modest, simple soul there rose on the moment impulses of pride he had never been conscious of possessing. Here, in his natural sphere, he was respected, thought well of, and everybody was aware how well he fulfilled his duties, bearing himself like a man, whatever he had to do. But this new world was all dark to him, a place in which he would have no guidance of experience, in which he would be judged according to another standard, and looked down upon. I do not mean to paint Dick as a perfect being, and this sense of natural pride, this personal humiliation in his social rise, gave him a pang which was at least as respectable as other pangs of pride. He did not know how long he sat there pondering blankly, forecasting with sombre thoughts an unknown future. He had lost himself, whom he knew, and he could not tell how the new self whom he did not know would be able to harmonise his life. He was still sitting there, with his hands over his eyes, when a faint sound in the room roused him, and, looking up, he saw his mother, who had entered softly, and now stood looking at him. He returned her look seriously for a moment before he spoke.

“Mother, is this true ?”

“Yes,” she said, clasping her hands as if she would have wrung them. “Yes, boy, yes ; it's true. I gave up the one, because I thought he had a right to one ; and I kept you, Dick. I was your mother that bore you, and sure I had a right to you.”

“Just a word more, mother,” said Dick, softly, “not to vex you : the little chap that died—was it *him* ?—the one that you said died ?”

“He died to me,” she cried—“to me and to you. I never, never thought to set eyes on him again. I gave him up, free. Dick, that night on the river, when you helped him with his boat——”

“Yes, mother ?”

“I should ha' gone away then. I should have taken you off, my boy, and never let you know him ; but it got into my head like wine,” she cried ; “the sight of him, Dick, so

handsome and so kind ! and to think he was my lad, mine, all the same as you. And he'd look at me in such a way, wondering like, as nobody but him ever looked—as if he wanted to ask, who are you ? who are you ?—what are you to me ? Many and many a day I've caught his eye ; and nobody but me knew why the lad looked like that—him least of all—only me. It got into my head, Dick, watching him. I couldn't go. And then to see you two together that were never meant to be together all your lives ! ”

“ You mean, mother, that were born never to be separate ? ” said Dick.

“ Yes, lad, yes ; that is what I mean,” she cried, dropping into a chair, and covering her face with her apron. For a moment there was that in Dick's heart which kept him from speaking, from trying to comfort her. The best of us now and then must think of ourselves. Dick was too much confused in mind to blame his mother, but it gleamed across him, among so many other thoughts—if it was to be that he was not Dick Brown, how much better it would have been that he had never been Dick Brown ; this is a confused sentence, but it was thus that the thought passed through his mind. The loss of himself, and even of “ the little chap that died,” pained him—and this loss was for no reason, it seemed—for how much better would it have been had he always known the truth ! This kept him for a moment from saying anything to her—but only for a moment ; then he rose and went to his mother, laying his hand on her shoulder—

“ It's all very confusing, mother,” he said ; “ but it's best you did not go away. I've got most of my happiness in life from knowing—him. The pity is you ever did go away, mother dear ; but never mind ; anyhow, though all the rest is changed, there's nothing changed between you and me.”

“ Oh, my lad ! ” she cried, “ they'll take you from me—they'll take you both from me, Dick.”

“ They can't do that,” he said with a smile, soothing her ; “ you forget we're *men*, mother. Take heart. So he's the little chap that died ? I always thought there was something about him different from all the other gentlemen,” said Dick, melting. “ The first time I set eyes on him, I fancied him—and he me,” he added after a little pause, the moisture creeping to his eyes ; “ which was more strange ; for what was I that he should take notice of me ? ”

The first time he saw you, mother, he was so struck he could scarcely speak ; and said, Why didn't I tell him you were a lady——”

“ Me ! ” she cried, looking up ; “ me—a lady——”

“ That was what he said—he knew better than the like of us,” said Dick. Then, after a pause, the good fellow added, with self-abnegation like that of old Lord Eskside, for he did not like to acknowledge this any more than his grandfather did ; “ and they say he's your living picture, mother—and it's true.”

“ Oh, Dick ! oh, my boy, my Val, that I've carried in my arms and nursed at my breast !—but he'll never know his mother. Come, Dick, come, as long as we've the strength. We'll go away, lad, you and me——”

“ Where, mother ? ”

“ Out, out, anywhere—to the road. It's there I belong, and not in houses. Before they take you both from me—Dick, Dick, come !—we'll go away, you and me.”

She started up as she spoke and caught at his arm—but, giddy and weak with long watching and the fatigue, which in her excitement she had not felt, dropped heavily against him, and would have fallen had he not caught her. “ It's nothing ; it's a dizziness,” she murmured. “ I'll rest a moment, and then we'll go.”

Dick laid her tenderly upon his bed. “ You're overdone, mother dear,” he said ; “ and this house is mine whatever happens, and you're the queen in it, to do what you please. When you're rested, we'll think what to do. Besides, *he* may want us yet,” he added, forcing a smile ; “ he is not out of the wood yet that we should run away from him. Mother, though he's my—brother, as you all say, I don't seem to know his name.”

The mother, lying down on her son's bed, with Dick's kind face bending over her, gave way to a soft outburst of tears. “ He is Val,” she said. “ Dick and Val—Dick and Val. Oh, how often I've said them over !—and one to him and one to me. That was just ; I always knew that was just ! ” she cried.

It seemed to Dick when he went out of the room, leaving her behind him to rest, that years had passed over him since he took refuge there. Already this strange disclosure was an old thing of which there could be no doubt. Already he was as certain that he was no longer Dick Brown of

Styles's, as he was of his existence—and would have been sharply surprised, I think, had any one called him by that name: and as a consequence of this certainty he had ceased to consider the change in himself. Something else more interesting, more alarming, lay before him—a new world, a family of which he knew nothing, a father whom he disliked to think of. Even Val, whom he knew, would be changed to him. He had felt for him as a brother before he knew; would he be a brother now? or would the very bond of duty, the right Dick had to his affection, quench that warm sweet fountain of boyish kindness which had risen so spontaneously, and brightened the young wanderer's life? Then there was his mother to think of among all these strange unknown people. He had understood very imperfectly the story Lord Eskside had told him; and now he came to think of it, why was it that she, so young as she must have been, had fled from her husband? What reason could she have had for it, unless her husband treated her unkindly? This idea roused all the temper (there was not much) in Dick's honest nature. No one should treat her unkindly now, or look down upon her, or scorn her lowliness! With a swelling heart Dick made this vow to himself. He would have to defend her, to protect her honour, and credit, and independence; and then, on the other hand, he would have to stand against herself, her wild impulse of flight, her impatience of control. Already he felt that, though it was but an hour or two since he had been Dick Brown, he could never be Dick Brown again; and though he would not have his mother crossed or troubled, still she must not, if he could help it, fly and turn everything into chaos any more.

Care thus rose upon Dick on every side as he forecasted his new life; but it had to be faced, and he did so with steady valour. He went softly to the door of the sick-room and looked in to see if anything was wanted. Val, very weak and spent, but conscious, and noting what went on with eager curiosity, saw him, and, smiling faintly, beckoned to him with his hand. Lady Eskside was seated in the place so long occupied by his other nurse, bending fondly over her boy. She said, "Come in," but with a half-jealous, half-fretful tone. She thought it was the mother, and the old lady *was* jealous, though she would not have willingly betrayed it, longing just for one hour to have her boy to herself. Val held out his thin hand, and said, "Brown, old

fellow ! how pleasant it is to see you again ! " " I am glad you are better," said Dick, feeling cold and hard as the nether millstone. It was not Val who had changed, but himself. Then he went out of the room with a sensation of meanness and misery, and going down-stairs, wrote that letter in which, for the first time, he called his brother by his name. In the midst of this a sudden softening came to him. He put down his pen, and his dry eyes grew moist, and an infinite sweetness stole into his heart. Now he should see *her* again, speak to her perhaps, be a friend of hers. He finished his letter hastily, but how could he sign it ? What name had he but his Christian name ? He could not put a false name to her ; so he ended his letter hastily, and went out to post it, as he always did, himself. And then another thing happened to him, a new step in his career.

In the little dark passage at the foot of the stairs, he met Richard face to face : they had scarcely met before, but they could not pass each other now that they knew each other, and each knew that the other knew. It was a strange meeting to be the first between a father and son, but yet there was a kind of advantage in getting it over, which Richard was quick to perceive. In his heart he was little less embarrassed than his son was ; but he was a man of the world, and knew how to behave in an emergency with that ease of speech, which looks half miraculous to the inexperienced. He held out his hand to his son at first without saying anything, and poor Dick felt in spite of himself the strangest thrill of unexpected feeling when he put out with hesitation his hard workman's hand into that white and soft yet vigorous clasp. Then Richard spoke :

" My father has told you what we are to each other," he said. " My boy, I do not blame your mother ; but it is not my fault that I see you now for the first time. But I know you a little—through Val, your brother : who found you by instinct, I suppose, after we had all searched for you in vain."

Dick's countenance was all aglow with the conflict of feeling in him ; his voice laboured in his throat with words that would not come. The contrast between his own difficulty of speech and the ease of the other unmanned him altogether. " I—I have known—him—a long time," was all he could stammer forth.

" Thank heaven for that !" said Richard, with a gleam

of real pleasure ; and with another pressure of his hand he let his new son go. Dick went out to post his letter strangely excited but subdued. What it was to be a gentleman, he thought ! and this was his father, *his* father ! A new pride unknown to him before came into existence within him, a glimmer which lighted up that dim landscape. After all, the new world, though it was so strangely mysterious and uncertain, was it not more splendid, more beautiful to the imagination, than the old world could ever have been ?

Val made slow but sure progress towards recovery, and the family lived a strange life in attendance upon him, occupying Dick's little parlour all day, and returning to the hotel for the night. The intercourse between them was of a peculiar character. Dick, watching intently, jealous for his mother, soon perceived that she was of much more importance to the others than he thought possible, and had his fears appeased. He watched her almost as if she had been his young sister, and Richard Ross her lover, eager to note if they met, and when and how ; but, as it happened, they scarcely met at all, she keeping to the sick-room above, he to the parlour below. As for Dick himself he became Val's slave, lifting him when he was first moved, helping him continually, indispensable to his invalid existence. He called for "Brown" when he woke in the morning, and ordered him about with an affectionate imperiousness which was at once provoking and delightful to Dick. But Val was much more mysterious in the looks with which he regarded "Brown's mother." He did not talk to her much, but watched her movements about the room with a half-reverential admiration. "She will wear herself out. She is too good to me ; you ought to make her go and rest," he said to Dick ; but he was uneasy when she left him, and impatient of any other nursing. He half-frightened half-shocked Lady Eskside by his admiration of her. "How handsome she is, grandmamma !" he whispered in the old lady's ear. "How she carries herself ! Where could Brown's mother get such a way of walking ? I think she must have been a princess." "Hush, my darling, hush !" said my lady. "Nonsense ! I am all right ; I don't mean to hush any more," said Val. "I think she is handsomer than any one I ever saw." This Lady Eskside put up with, magnanimously making up her mind that nature spoke in the boy's foolish words ; but it was hard upon her when her old

lord began to blow trumpets in honour of Dick, who took walks with him when he could be spared from Valentine, and whom in his enthusiasm he would almost compare advantageously with Val! It was true, that it was she herself who had first pressed Dick's claims upon him; but with Val just getting better, and doubly dear from that fact, who could venture to compare him with any one? She liked Dick—but Lord Eskside was “just infatuated” about him, my lady thought. “He reminds me of my father,” said the old lord. Now this father was the tenth lord—him of the dark locks, by means of whom she had always attempted to account for Valentine's brown curls, and whose portrait her son Richard disrespectfully called a Raeburn. She gave a little gulp of self-control when she heard these words. “Make no comparisons!” she cried, “or you'll make me like the new boy less, because I love the old one more. To me there will never be any one in the world like my Val.” Lord Eskside shrugged his old shoulders, and went out for another walk with Dick.

At last the day arrived when Valentine was pronounced well enough to have the great disclosure made to him. For two or three days in succession he had been brought down-stairs and had enjoyed the sight of the old world he knew so well, the river and the trees seen from the window, and the change—with all the delight of convalescence. And wonderfully sweet, and imperious, and seductive he was to them all, in that moment while still he did not know, holding his *levée* like a sovereign, not enduring any absence. On that important morning when the secret was to be disclosed to him, he noted with his usual imperious friendliness the absence of “Brown's mother” from the group that gathered round him, and sent Dick off for her at once. “Unless she is resting she must come. Ask her to come; why should she be left out?” said Val, in his ignorance; which made the others look at each other with wondering eyes. She came in at Dick's call, and seated herself behind backs. She had put off her nursing dress, and wore the black gown and white net kerchief on her fine head, which added so much to the impressive character of her beauty. Amid all these well-born people there was no face in itself so striking and noble. The Rosses were all quite ordinary, except Val, who had taken his dark beauty from her. She, poor ignorant creature, made up of impulses, without a shadow of wisdom

or even good sense about her, looked like a dethroned queen among them: which shows, after all, how little looks matter—an argument which would be very powerful if it were not so utterly vain.

"Val," said Lord Eskside, who was the spokesman, as became his position, "I hope you are getting back your strength fast. The doctor tells us we may now make a disclosure to you which is very important. I do not know how you will take it, my boy; but it is so great, and of so much consequence, that I cannot keep it from you longer. Val——"

"Is it something about Violet?" said Valentine, the little colour there was paling out of his face.

"About—whom?"

"About Violet," he repeated, with a stronger voice. "Listen, sir; let me speak first;" and with the sudden flush of delicate yet deep colour which showed his weakness, Val raised his head from the sofa, and swung his feeble limbs, which looked so preternaturally long, to the ground. "I have not said anything about her while I have been ill, but it is not because I forgot. Grandfather, Violet and I made up our minds to marry each other before that confounded election. If her father did write that letter, it's not her fault; and I can't go on, sir, now I've come to myself, not another day, without letting you know that nothing, nothing in the world can make me change to Vi!"

There was a pause of astonishment so great that no one knew what to say: this sudden introduction of a subject altogether new and unsuspected bewildered the others, whose minds were all intent on one thing. Val was as one-idea'd as they were; but his idea was not their idea; and the shock of the encounter jarred upon them, so curiously sudden and out of place it seemed. Lady Eskside, who sat close by him, and to whom this was no revelation, was more jarred even than the rest. She put her fine old ivory hand on his arm, with an impatient grasp. "This is not the question—this is not the question," she said.

Val looked round upon them all, and saw something in their looks which startled him too. He put back his legs upon the sofa, and the flush gradually went off his cheek. "Well," he said, "well; whatever it is I am ready to hear it—so long as I make sure that you've heard me first."

“ Valentine,” said his father, “ at your age some such piece of foolishness always comes first ; but this time you have got to see the obverse of the medal—the other end of all this enthusiasm. It is my story, not your own, that you have to think of. Kind friends of course have told you——”

“ Richard,” said Lord Eskside, “ this is not the way to enter upon a subject so important. Let me speak. He knows my way best.”

Richard turned away with a short laugh—not of amusement indeed, but full of that irritated sense of incongruity which gives to anger a kind of fierce amusement of its own. Lord Eskside cleared his throat—he preferred to have the matter in his own hands.

“ Friends have told you little,” he said ; “ but an enemy, Val, the enemy whose daughter you have just told us you want to marry—but that’s neither here nor there—let you know the story. Your father there, Richard Ross, my son, married when he was young and foolish, like you. It was not an equal marriage, and the—lady—took some false notion into her head, I know not what, and left him—taking her two babies with her, as you have heard. These two babies,” said the old lord, once more clearing his throat, “ were your brother and you—so much as this you know.”

Here he stopped to take breath ; he was gradually growing excited and breathless in spite of himself.

“ We could not find you, though we did our best. We spared no trouble, either before you were brought home or after. Now, my boy, think a little. It is a very strange position. You have a brother somewhere in the world—the same flesh and blood, but not like you ; a mother——” He instinctively glanced at the woman who sat behind backs, like a marble statue, immovable. The crisis became too painful to them all. There was a stir of excitement when Lord Eskside came to this pause. His wife put her hand on his, grasping it almost angrily in the heat of suspense. Richard Ross began to pace about the room with restless passion.

“ Go on, oh, go on ! ” cried my lady, with a querulous quiver in her voice. I am not sure that the old lord, though so much excited himself, had not a certain pleasure in thus holding them all hanging on his breath.

“ In good time—in good time,” he said. “ Valentine, it may be a shock to you to find out these relations : it cannot

be but a great surprise. You are not prepared for it—your mind is full of other things——”

“ For God’s sake, sir,” cried Richard, “ do not drive us all mad ! Valentine, make up your mind for what you have to hear. Your mother is found——”

“ And your brother,” cried Lady Eskside, rushing in unconsciously as the excitement grew to a crisis. “ Your brother, too ! Oh, my boy, bear up !”

Dick had been standing by, listening with I know not what fire in his heart : he could bear it no longer. The shock and suspense, which were as great to him as to Valentine, had not been broken in his case by any precautions ; and it hurt his pride bitterly, on his mother’s account as well as his own, that the knowledge of them should be supposed such a terrible blow to Val. He stepped forth into the middle of the room (his own room, in which they made so little of him), his honest face glowing, his fair, good-humoured brows bent, almost for the first time in his life,—

“ Look here,” he said, hoarsely ; “ there is more than him to be thought of. If it’s hard upon him, he’s a man, and he’ll bear it like a man. Mr Ross, look here. I’m Dick Brown, sir, your humble servant ; I’m the lad you made a man of, from the time we were boys till now. You’ve done for me as the Bible says one brother should do for another,” said Dick, the tears suddenly starting into his eyes, and softening his voice, “ without knowing ; and now they say we’re brothers in earnest. Perhaps you’ll think it’s poor news ; as for me, I don’t mind which it is—your brother or your servant,” said Dick, his eyes shining, holding out both his hands ; “ one way or other, I couldn’t think more of you than I do now.”

Valentine had been lying motionless on his sofa, looking from one to another with large and wondering eyes. It is needless to say that amid so many different narrators he had already divined, even before Dick spoke, the solution of this mystery ; and it had given him sufficient shock to drive the blood back wildly to his heart. But he had time to *prendre son parti*, and he was too much of a man not to bear it like a man, as Dick said. When his new brother held out his hands, a sudden suffusion of colour came to Val’s face, and a smile almost of infantile sweetness and weakness. He took Dick’s hands and pulled himself up by them, grasping them with an eager pressure ; then changing, in his weak-

ness, took Dick's arm, upon which he leant so heavily that the young man's whole heart was moved. Familiar tenderness, old brotherhood, and that depth of absolute trust which no untried affection can possess, were all involved in the heavy pressure with which Val leant on Dick's arm ; but he did not say anything to him. His eyes went past Dick to the other side of the room, whither he walked feebly, leaning on his brother's arm. When they came in front of their mother the two young men stopped. With her old abstracted gaze modified by an indescribable mixture of terror and longing, she turned to them, pushing back her chair unconsciously, almost retreating as they approached. Val could not speak all at once. He looked at her eagerly, tenderly. "Is it true ?" he said ; "are you my—mother ?" The words were spoken slowly one by one, and seemed to tingle through the air *staccato*, like notes of music. All the others turned towards this central scene. Lady Eskside sat leaning forward in her chair, crying to herself, her streaming eyes fixed upon them. The old lord walked to the window, and, turning his back, looked out fiercely from under his shaggy eyebrows. Dick, supporting his brother on his arm, stood very erect and firm, while Val wavered and swayed about in his weakness. One great tear ran slowly down Dick's cheek. They were all spectators of what was about to happen between these two.

The mother stood out as long as she could, holding herself back, labouring to restrain herself. Then all at once her powers failed her. She started to her feet with a great cry, and throwing her arms round them both, pressed them together in a passionate embrace, kissing first one and then the other, wildly. "My two lads !" she cried ; "my two babies !—my children—my own children ! Only for once,—only for this one time !"

"Mother !" cried Val, faintly, dropping on the floor in his weakness, and drawing her into her seat. And there he lay for another moment, his head upon her breast, his arms round her. Her face was like the face of a saint in ecstasy. She pressed his dark curls against her bosom and kissed them, lifting the heavy locks up one by one—her eyes brimming with great tears which did not fall—saying again and again, under her breath, "For once—only for this once !" while Dick stood over them, sobbing, guarding them, as it seemed, from all other contact. I do not know how

many seconds of vulgar time this lasted. It was, and it was over. Suddenly she raised Valentine from her lap, and loosened his arms. "Dick, put him back upon the sofa ; he's overdone," she said, putting him into his brother's charge. She stood perfectly still, her hands clasped in nervous self-restraint, looking after the two for a moment ; watching till her patient was laid at ease upon his couch. Then she turned suddenly, subdued and still, to Richard, who had been looking on like the rest—"Now I'm ready," she said, very low. "I'll go where you please. There is one for you and one for me. I will never go back of my word to do you a wrong. It's good of you to let me kiss my lad once, only once ! And now I'll trouble him and you no more."

"Myra !" said Richard, coming forward to her. She had risen up, and stood like a stately wild creature, ready for flight. He took her hand in spite of her resistance, and I cannot describe the strange emotion, sympathy, almost tenderness, and hot provocation in Richard's face. He was more touched at heart than he had been for years, and he was more angry and provoked at the same time. "Myra," he said, "can you think of nothing but your children ? Have you forgotten that you are my wife, and that I have some claim upon you too ?"

She stood silent, holding back : then lifting her eyes looked at him pathetically. I think a faint sense of duty had begun to dawn in her mind ; and her look was pathetic, because she knew of no response to make to him. She had no desire to humiliate her husband by her indifference—such a thought was far beyond her ; but there was no reply to him in her mind. Perhaps he perceived this, and made a sudden effort to save his pride by appearing to ignore her silence. He drew her hand suddenly and impatiently within his arm, and led her forward to his mother's side—"Myra," he said quickly, "it is of the first importance for your children—for Val and Dick whom you love—and especially for Val, the eldest, that you should remain with us, and go away no more."

Lady Eskside rose to receive her ; they had met by Val's bedside many times before, but the old lady had feared to say anything to alarm the worn-out watcher. She rose now, looking at her with wistful anxiety, holding out her hands. My lady's eyes were still full of tears, and her fair old face

tremulous with emotion and sympathy. She took into her own the wanderer's reluctant hands—"Oh," she said, anxiously, "listen to what Richard says to you, my dear! You will get to know us by-and-by, and find out that we are your friends—my old lord and me; but your boys you love with all your heart already. Myra, listen! It is of the greatest importance to your children that you should stay with us and never leave us more—and, above all, for the eldest—above all, my dear, for Val."

She gave one half-frightened glance round as if to see whether there was any escape for her. Then she said, very low—"I will do whatever you please—but it is Dick who is the eldest, not Val."

"What!" they all cried, pressing round her—all but Val, who lay still on his sofa, and Dick, who stood over him; the two young men did not even notice what was going on. But Lord Eskside came from the window in one stride, and Richard grasped her arm in sudden terror: "What is that?—what is that she says?" cried the old lord.

"God bless *my* lads!" she said, gaining possession of herself, looking at the two with a smile on her face. She was calm, as utter ignorance, utter foolishness could be; then she added, with a soft sigh, of something that looked like happiness in her ignorant composure—"But it is Dick who is the eldest, and not Val."

CHAPTER XL.

IT was the beginning of May when the party went home, and everything was green on Eskside. Were I to describe all that happened before they left Oxford, so strange a family group as they were—the old Lady Eskside with the tramp-woman, the high-bred Secretary of Legation, along with Styles's head man—and how they managed to exist together, the lion with the lamb—I should require a volume. But this would weary the reader, who can easily imagine for himself that any happiness which might be produced by this reunion of the divided family was counterbalanced by many circumstances which were not happy. The grandparents, I

think, would have been really happy in the removal of all mystery from their family story, the complete establishment of the rights and heirship of their beloved Val, and the winning qualities of Dick, but for the sudden chaos into which they were replunged by the mother's calm declaration of Dick's seniority. Its effect upon them was indescribable. Richard, with his diplomatic instincts, seeing that his sons had not paid any attention to, or even heard, this extraordinary statement, hushed it up with an impetuous and peremptory promptitude which took even his father and mother by surprise, and silenced them. "Not another word," he whispered to them; "not a word! the boys have heard nothing; for the present let nothing more be said;" and the old couple, in the suddenness of this strange juncture, let themselves be overruled, and left the guidance in his hands. As for the mother herself, she attached no weight to the circumstance. She was too ignorant to know, and too much abstracted in her mind to think, that it made any difference which was the eldest. She had not kept Dick for that reason, nor had she left Val at Rossraig with any intention of avenging herself upon the family by thus substituting the youngest for the just heir, which was the first thought that crossed Lady Eskside's mind. No; she had been guided by mere chance, as we say, snatching up the one boy instead of the other in her despair, for the most trivial reason, as the reader may recollect. And even now it did not occur to her that what she had said was of any consequence, though she saw it affected the others in some incomprehensible way. Her mind had no capacity for entering upon such a question. She was far more deeply moved by the chance that Valentine might be tired out—more solicitous to know whether it was time for his beef-tea. Richard kept his parents quiet until Val had gone to bed, and Dick to sit by him and read to him, when the three had an anxious consultation; and the packet of papers which Richard had brought from Italy, and which up to this moment had remained unopened, was examined, and found to confirm, with frightful accuracy, the statements of the mother. There it was incontestable, Dick was set down as the eldest, notwithstanding the impression upon Richard's mind which, on Val's first appearance, had led to the mistake.

This confirmation subdued them all into a kind of despair. Lord and Lady Eskside, both at different times, had received

Dick into their affections, as they thought, and acknowledged, with a certain pride, his natural worthiness. But when it appeared possible that this new and unknown boy (though they liked him) might put himself in the place of their Valentine—the child of their old age, the light of their eyes—their hearts sank within them. All their satisfaction and enthusiasm was chilled, nay, frozen ; they sat and looked at each other blankly, their gladness turned into dire disappointment and heaviness. Then it was that Richard urged upon them the necessity of silence. “Let us take time to think,” he said ; “time is everything. Val, it is clear, can bear no further excitement ; it might be fatal to him ; nor can it be good for the other boy. He is an honest, kind fellow ; but how can we tell if his head is strong enough to bear such a change of fortune ? Let him get used to the part of younger brother first. For heaven’s sake, let us hold our tongues, and say nothing more about it now.”

Lord Eskside shook his head ; but my lady seconded her son, alarmed at the idea he had skilfully brought forward of danger to Val. “Yes, he is a good honest fellow,” they both said, but with an involuntary grudge against Dick, as if it could be his fault ; and the papers were put up carefully in Lord Eskside’s despatch-box, and the news still more closely locked in the bosoms of the three who knew the secret. But it is astonishing how their knowledge of this took all heart out of their conscientious effort to adapt themselves to the new state of things. Valentine, whatever his internal difficulties were, accepted the position much more easily. His illness softened it to him, and had already produced that familiar intercourse with his mother and brother, which the mere discovery that they were his mother and brother could not have brought about ; and the happiness of convalescence which glorified all the circumstances about him, made it still more easy. He lived a life of delightful idleness, feeling nothing but benevolence and kindness for every created thing, how much more for his tender nurses and companions !—getting well, eating and sleeping, and loving idle talk, and to have all his people about him. He was so much a child in this, that even his father, whom Val had never been familiar with, came in for a share of his sociable affectionate desire to be always surrounded by the group of those who belonged to him. He called for everybody, with that regal power which is never possessed in

such perfection as by an invalid, to whom all who love him are bound by a hundred ties of gratitude and admiration for having been so good and so clever as to get well. He could not bear a look too serious, a clouded face, and was himself as cheerful as the day, enjoying everything. Dick, I need not say, had told him of that meeting with Violet, and of his letters to her, and by this means Val had got up a spring of private delight for himself—carrying on a limited but charming correspondence, which, indeed, was all on one side, but which still gave him infinite pleasure. “Keep up the Brown delusion, Dick,” he said, with infinite relish of the fun, “till we go home ; and then we’ll tell her. What a joke, to be sure, that you should ever have been Brown !” And indeed this was already the aspect the past had taken to both the young men ; and it was the strangest absurd thing, scarcely comprehensible, how they could ever have believed it. The two had no share in the perturbation of their elders. Good Dick was, as he had said, more the servant of that young demigod and hero than if he had not been his brother. He did everything for him—read to him, talked to him, brought him the news, and lived over again every day of their intercourse since that day when they first “took a liking to each other.” How strange it all seemed—how extraordinary, and yet how natural—in face of this broad and obvious explanation, which made everything plain !

I need not say that it was also the idea of Richard Ross to put into the Edinburgh paper that cunning intimation that the young member for Eskshire had been taken ill at the house of his mother, the Hon. Mrs Richard Ross, at Oxford. Scarcely a soul who read that intimation ever thought of anything but the luxurious and dignified dwelling which an Hon. Mrs Ross would ordinarily inhabit ; and the people who knew Oxford tried hard to recollect whether they had ever met her, and where her house was. The county in general was much perplexed and much affected by this notice. It seemed impossible to believe that there was any specious falsehood in so matter-of-fact a paragraph. “The old stories must all be false,” one said to another ; “Richard’s wife has been living separate from her husband, that is all.” “But no one ever heard who she was,” the doubting ones said ; though even the greatest sceptic added, “I will ask my son if he has ever met her in society.”

Thus Richard's diplomacy had full success. He followed it up by other delicate touches, bulletins of Valentine's recovery, and tantalising hints such as only local gossip can permit, and which were reserved for the pages of the 'Castleton Herald'—of the happy domestic *rapprochements* which the Editor was delighted to hear Mr Ross's illness, otherwise so regrettable, was likely to bring about. All this made a great commotion in the district. You may think it was beneath the dignity of a man of Richard Ross's pretensions to descend to such means of breaking to the public a great family event, which might otherwise have been differently interpreted; but your great man, and especially your *diplomate* and courtier, is always the one most disposed to make use of flunkeyism and the popular love of gossip. It is a sign, perhaps, of the cynical disregard of this elevated class of mortals for ordinary people; anyhow, they rarely hesitate to avail themselves of means which would wound the pride of many less exalted persons. Life, like dreams (to which, heaven knows, it bears in all matters so close a resemblance), goes by contraries. What the poor and simple scorn, the rich and wise employ.

The Eskshire people, however, were destined to yet another sensation more startling than this. It was in the nature of a recantation, and few recantations have excited more local interest. I will not attempt to describe all the motives and influences which were supposed to have brought it about—for the reader is better informed, and knows that it was brought about very simply, as perhaps some of his own good deeds are, by the intervention and pertinacity of a slim girl with a soft voice and a pair of pleading eyes. Nobody on Eskside knew that Violet, at the point of the sword as it were, had extracted an apology from her father. It appeared on the walls in the shape of a placard, about the middle of April, and was sent by post to all the influential persons in the district. Lasswade was white with it, every bit of fence possessing the paper. It was addressed, like another notable letter, to the Electors of Eskshire; but it was much shorter than the former one. What it said was as follows:—

"**GENTLEMEN**,—It will be within the recollection of all of you that, a few months ago, I thought it my duty to address to you a letter concerning the standing and pretensions of Mr

Valentine Ross, now Conservative member for this county. It seemed right that you should take into consideration what then appeared to me the very doubtful proofs of Mr Ross's identity. I am strongly opposed to him and his family in politics ; and I confess I thought it my duty to indicate to you in the distinctest manner how poorly supported by fact were his claims to your confidence. I am a Whig, and Mr Ross is a Tory, and I do not pretend to be above the ordinary tactics of electioneering, which have been pushed to further lengths than were possible to me, by men of much higher worldly pretensions than myself. But whether as Whig or as Tory, I hope it will always be an Englishman's highest boast to be an honest man ; and circumstances have convinced me that it is my duty to convey to my brother electors an Apology for statements which I formerly made to them under the influence of a mistake, and which I now find are less certain than I then thought them. It is no disgrace to any man to have fallen into a mistake, if, when he discovers it, he takes pains to undo any mischief it may have produced.

“With this preface I will simply say, that though it is quite true, as I stated, that Mr Valentine Ross appeared at his grandfather's house in a very strange and suspicious way, the inference I drew from that is, I have reason to believe, incorrect. It does not become me to enter into the private history of a family so well known in this county ; but I believe steps will shortly be taken to remove all possibility of doubt upon the subject ; and I can only say that I for one am now convinced that our new member has the fullest right to the name he bears. These important facts have only come to my knowledge within the last fortnight ; and I consider it my duty, putting aside all false pride, which so often hinders a man from acknowledging a mistake publicly made, at once to communicate this discovery to the electors of Eskshire. I am as far from agreeing with Mr Ross and his family politically as I ever was ; but I cannot continue to do a social injury to any man after I have found out that my impression was a mistaken one. If I have conveyed a prejudice against Mr Valentine Ross to the mind of any brother elector, I can only add that I am unfeignedly sorry for it.

“AN ESKSIDE ELECTOR.”

This was the first thing that met the eyes of the travelling party when—duly heralded by the Castleton paper, which in its last issue had announced the approaching return of “Lord and Lady Eskside, the Hon. Richard and Mrs Ross, Mr Valentine Ross, M.P. for Eskshire, and Mr Richard Ross the younger”—they arrived at Lasswade. The old lord himself was the first to read it when they got out at the little railway station on the new branch line, which, as everybody knows, is still a mile or two distant from the village. There were two carriages waiting—the great barouche, which was Lady Eskside's favourite, and a vehicle of the genus dog-cart for “the boys;” and the usual little commotion which always attends an arrival left a few minutes to spare while the carriage drew up. Lord Eskside came and took his old wife by the arm, and led her to the place where this address, blazoned in great letters, “To the Electors of Eskshire,” held a prominent position. “Is it something new?” she asked with a sickness at her heart; “oh, don't let Val see it!” When she had read it, however, the old pair looked at each other and laughed with tremulous enjoyment. I am afraid it did not occur to them to look at this as a high-minded atonement, or to see any generosity in the confession. “Sandy Pringle is worsted at last,” the old lord said, with a gleam of light from under his eyebrows. But the exhilaration of unquestionable victory filled their hearts, and made them forget for the moment the other drawbacks which attended their return.

With this sense of having beaten their adversary strong in their minds, they no longer hesitated to drive home through Lasswade, which they had not intended to do; where they had a most flattering reception. What with the curiosity excited by this probable *éclaircissement* of a romantic story and the eagerness of everybody to see Richard Ross's wife, and the new excitement produced by that placard on the walls—which most people, I fear, received as Lord Eskside received it—every one was agog. It was not a formal entrance with triumphal arches, &c., for this is not a kind of demonstration very congenial to the natural independence of the Lowland Scotch mind, which is much disposed to be friendly towards its great neighbours, but very little disposed to feudal notions of the respect due to a superior. Willie Maitland, it is true, had once thought of suggesting something of the sort, but he had fortunately forborne; and

accordingly, though there was an absence of flags and decorations, a very warm spontaneous welcome was given to the travellers. They stopped at the door of the Bull, and the carriage was instantly surrounded by a genial crowd, attracted, it is true, quite as much by a desire for information, as by a wish to do honour to Lord Eskside's family ; and there, sure enough, by my lady's side sat the unknown Mrs Ross, looking out with large eyes, in which a certain terror and wonder combated the look of abstraction which was habitual to them. She had been here before—how well she remembered how ! not in the chief street, honoured of everybody, but dragging through the muddy roads, dull and despairing, with her two crying children. The cold wild March night of her recollection was not more unlike the soft sunshine of this May-day, than was her own position now and then. Was she more happy ? She did not ask herself the question. Only people in a more or less artificial state of self-consciousness do ever ask themselves if they are happy or not ; the uninstructed soul takes life as it comes. But her aspect impressed the people of Lasswade. They concluded that she was "not very happy with her husband ;" and as Richard was not popular in the county he despised, this rather prepossessed the popular mind in her favour ; but that this woman had ever been the "beggar-wife" of the popular legend, the county ever after refused to believe.

The Dowager-Duchess had driven into Lasswade, of course "by accident," on that afternoon, and so had Sir John and his lady ; and it is astonishing how many other carriages of lesser potentates the Eskside party met on their way home. It was a fine day to be sure ; everybody was out ; and every separate detachment of anxious neighbours had its own remarks to make. "The second son looks a fine lad," the good people said ; for indeed Dick had beamed with grateful smiles upon every one who had a welcome for Val. And thus the family, at last united, with glad welcome of all their neighbours, and retraction of their enemy's slanders, made their way home. "You see we've brought Sandy Pringle to his marrow-bones, my lord !" cried Willie Maitland the factor, my lord's right-hand man, as they drove away from the door of the Bull. "Ay, ay, the auld sneck-drawer !" said Lord Eskside in his glee. This was all Mr Pringle made by his apology. Val, I am happy to say, was otherwise disposed—he took it generously touched by the

confession, not triumphing in it, as extorted from his assailant ; and his explanation of the placard, which he too had read eagerly to his brother and confidant, was made in a very different tone. "I knew old Pringle was a good fellow," said Val ; "he was forced to it by his party ; but the moment he hears the truth he comes forward and owns it like a man. Our fathers and mothers think differently from us, Dick, old fellow. They think because old Pringle is out of it so long as you and I are to the fore, that therefore he must be our enemy. I always knew it was nothing of the sort, but only a party move," said Valentine, flourishing his whip with that delicious sense of generous superior wisdom which dwells in the bosom of youth ; and then he added, softly, "After this, surely they can't make any more row about Violet and me."

"I should think not," said Dick, with a sigh ; the sight of those Eskside woods, where he had seen her, came back to his mind with a strange thrill. What a moment of enchantment that had been ! He had never hoped it would come back again. How could he wish it to come back, when only by injury to Val it could ever bring any happiness to him ? And, to be sure, he had only seen Violet twice, never long enough to—— "What a lucky fellow you are !" was what he said.

"Am I not ?" cried Val, in his frank happiness ; "I should think this was the very last stone rolled out of my way."

There had been a great commotion in RossCraig, preparing everything for the family party ; the new wing had been opened, the carpets put down, the curtains up, and everything arranged according to Lady Eskside's orders. The new wing had all kinds of conveniences in it—sitting-rooms for the young couple for whom it was prepared, nurseries for the children, everything that could help to make it agreeable to a son's family under the same roof with his father and mother. But as it happened now, both Richard and Valentine preferred to keep their old rooms ; and the new wing was given up to Dick and his mother, to whom it appeared a wilderness of grandeur, confusing and blank in its extent and wealth. It had windows which looked down upon the wooded bank of the Esk, and windows which looked to the great door and court-yard, and a suite of rooms through which you could wander from one side to another,

for it ran all the breadth of the house. I am not sure that these two, transported into that luxurious place, did not feel the change more painfully and strangely than its natural occupants would have done had they been suddenly dismissed to Styles's river-side cottage. The mother felt it most of all. She sat in her own rooms almost all the day, patiently receiving the visits of her sons and of Lady Eskside, but never seeking them in the other portions of the house—brightening to see Val, but saying little even to him. She was chilled and stifled by all these fine surroundings. Often she would rise and fling the windows open, or pull at the curtains instinctively, as if to pull them down. "I can't breathe," she would sometimes say to Dick, with a plaintive tone in her voice. Her life, such as it was, was gone from her. She was quite submissive, doing all that was asked of her, attempting no resistance. I cannot explain the entire cessation now of the struggle which she had kept up so long, any more than she could. Fate was too strong for her, and her strength was waning ; but when she yielded, she yielded altogether, unreasoning and unreasonably, as she had struggled—her mind was not capable of compromise, or of making the best of a position. When she gave in she dropped her arms entirely, and with her arms her strength.

And strangely enough, Val, the sight of whom had kept her alive, lost his power now over his mother, and Dick, who was her own, became all in all to her. She was happy only when her familiar companion was by her, and could not be persuaded to go out except with Dick. Sometimes when they wandered into the woods a gleam of something like pleasure would come upon her face. There was one knoll which they found out by chance in the very heart of the trees, a little bank which, when they discovered it first, was covered with late primroses. The trees were very thick round, and the sun came late, and penetrated but a short time through the heavy boughs ; and this, I suppose, kept them later in blooming than their rustic neighbours. It is long, long since I have seen these flowers ; and perhaps it is the misty glory of that morning-time of childhood that makes me feel there never were any such primroses before or after in this commonplace world—so large, so spotless, so full of sweetness, instinct with a lovely life of their own, friends rather than flowers. Their long stalks thrilled with a youthful force of existence, their green cool leaves overlapped each

other, glistening with heavenly dew, their celestial petals were not like pale gold or soft velvet, which are the first vulgar images one thinks of, but like themselves only—primroses, the very essence of spring and fragrance and everlasting youth. When I shut my eyes I can see them still, lifting up their lovely heads out of their leaves, looking you and heaven in the face with all the candour of innocence, though it is, oh, so many years since they and I saw each other ! When Dick and his mother, wandering through the woods, came to this bank, it seemed to touch her heart as nothing had done. She sat down on the grass and gazed at the flowers in a transport. “ If we were as we used to be,” she said, “ oh, Dick, my lad, how you would have run to the cart for a basket ! It seems no more than waste to gather them now. What would we do with them ? there’s grander flowers in all the rooms ; they’d be like you and me, Dick, out of our place. Flowers were always what I liked. I never was one for saying much,” she went on, reflectively, “ but a basket of primroses, that speaks for itself.”

“ How you go back upon the old days, mother ! said Dick, regretfully, and perhaps with a slight reproach.

“ Yes, lad ; I liked them best. It’s heavy on me to be shut up in houses. I was never used to it,” she said, with a sigh.

“ But you can put up with it, mother ?—you *will* put up with it ?—for the sake of Val—and me.”

A gleam came from her eyes—a sparkle of tenderness and light. “ I’ll do what’s best,” she said—“ whatever is best :” then with a sudden rush of tears, “ You may let me think of the old days, Dick ; for my strength’s changed, and my mind’s changed, and I never can go back to them—never no more—even if I would.”

“ But, mother,” said Dick, “ it used to keep you happy to see Val only on the river, once a-day or twice a-day, in his boat. I did not know why it was then ; but I saw it ; and now you’ve got him altogether——”

“ Ah, it’s different, it’s different !” she cried ; “ can’t you see, lad ? Then he was none o’ mine—he was his father’s ; it was more than I could have hoped for to see him like that—it kept me alive. Now he’ll come to me when I like, Dick ; and kind he looks and kind he speaks, God bless him ! He’d do himself an injury to please me ; but ah, it’s different ! If I could take them to the market in a

basket, and sell a bunch here and a bunch there, that's what I would like," she went on with a sudden change of tone, drawing the flowers through her thin hands.

It was with a kind of despair that Dick took her home. She was getting thin visibly, he thought. She would sit at the window for hours together, gazing, seeing nothing. For the first few days she suffered herself to be taken to the family meals, but this evidently agitated her beyond endurance, and had to be given up. What was to be done? Not one of them could tell, or indeed form an idea; the only thing that could be trusted in was time, which might possibly bring back a subdued harmony to those chords which at present were all ajar; but for the moment there seemed little hope even of that. All the restlessness of old came back to her. When the active habits of her life at Oxford became unnecessary, the self-restraint she had learnt there failed her also. She took to talking (when she did talk) of nothing but the tramp-life, which seemed to have suddenly come into prominence in her mind. Now and then she dozed in the long afternoons, and Dick heard her murmuring in her sleep about the long road, and how far it was, and the lad that was tired. Poor Dick's satisfaction in his new circumstances was suddenly subdued by this. It did not occur to him that she was ill; he thought it was one of the old fits coming on, in which he had always felt the dreadful risk there was that she might go secretly away from him, and never be heard of more. To be sure, he comforted himself by thinking these fits had always gone off again, and so perhaps would this one now.

Thus the family life recommenced under its changed circumstances. I doubt whether any one in the great house was happy. The old people had a secret in their keeping, which destroyed their peace, and which must produce further troubles still; and Dick had his mother, whose state alarmed him: and Richard Ross was in a position very difficult for a man to bear, totally ignored by his wife, yet feeling a curious secret attraction towards her, and a half-whimsical half-tragical wonder whether they were ever to be drawn closer, or if all was over between them. Valentine, the happiest of the party, was not without his troubles too, for he had written to Violet, and received no reply, and at the Hewan there was no intelligence to be obtained of her. Thus they had all enough to do to carry on the possi-

bilities of living ; and the great happiness and good fortune which had come to them, scarcely looked for the moment like good fortune at all.

CHAPTER XLI.

A SHORT time after their return, Valentine made up his youthful mind that he could bear his share of these uncertainties no longer. He had been to the Hewan again and again ; now he set off to Moray Place itself, saying nothing to his relations, except to Dick, who winced, but kept his counsel. But all the ardent young lover made by his persistence was an interview with Mrs Pringle, who received him stiffly, and declined to answer any inquiries about Violet, who was absent from home. "I do not suppose your family would be pleased if they knew ; and my family would be still less pleased, that Violet should be held cheap," said Mrs Pringle. "If you will believe me, Valentine, I think it is much better that there should be no more about it ;" and all Val's remonstrances and pleadings were of no avail. He came back miserable and dejected, and strayed out to the woods, in which there is always some consolation for a heart-broken lover. Val went as far as the linn, that he might see the place at least where he had been so happy. Was it possible, after all he had gone through, that his love and his happiness were to end like a dream, and every link to be snapt between him and Vi ? When he approached that spot which was so full of associations, he too heard sounds, as Dick had done, which told of some human intrusion into this realm of woodland and waters. It was not a sob this time that Val heard. It was a sound of low voices—women's voices—talking in a half-whisper, as if they feared to be discovered. Drawing near, trembling, like a thief, he saw under the big beech-branches a corner of a blue dress, showing from behind one of them. This made his heart beat ; but the blue gown might not be Vi's blue gown ; and anyhow there were two of them, as the voices testified, so that caution was needful. Another step, however, relieved him of his doubts. In front of him,

on the green bank on the river-side, sat Mary Percival, with her face turned towards some one unseen, to whom she was talking. "My dear, he has had plenty of time to write to you, and he has not done so. If you will believe me, Vi, I think it is a great deal better there should be no more about it." These were, though Mary did not know it, the self-same words under which Val was suffering. The repetition of them drove him beyond himself. He gave a shout of indignant protestation, and rushing between the two astonished ladies, caught her of the blue dress rudely, suddenly, in his arms.

But do not think Violet was half so much surprised as middle-aged Mary was, to whom this interruption was quite unlooked for. She did not know even that "the family" had arrived at Rosscraig—Lady Eskside, amid all this tumult of events, having become remiss in her correspondence, and Val's letters to Violet having been, if not suppressed, yet detained at Moray Place during the girl's absence. Even if the family had returned, Mary felt there were a hundred chances to one that Val would not be there precisely at the right moment to meet her and her companion. In Mary's own case things had never happened just at the right moment; and therefore she had acquiesced with little difficulty in Violet's prayer that she might be allowed "one look" at the linn. Violet had been sent to Mary to be taken care of—to be kept out of danger; and this, I am ashamed to say, was how Miss Percival, who had a strong vein of romance in her, notwithstanding all her good sense, fulfilled her trust. She saw her folly now when it was too late.

"Valentine!" she cried, "how dare you—how dare you do *that*—when her parents do not know?"

"Her parents!" said Val, equally indignant; "what do I care for her parents, or any one's parents? I am a man, old enough to know my own mind, and so is Vi. Can parents make us happy?" said the young man, with that cruel frankness which seems so easy to the young, and is so hard upon the old. "Vi, my darling, you know you are mine—you won't let parents or any one come between you and me?"

Vi did not say a word—there was no need for anything so feeble as words. She clung to him, gazing at him, holding one of his arms fast with her small hands clasped round

it. She had been sure he would come ; in her heart she had been so wicked as to smile at Mary's faith the other way, though she did not say a word of the sweet confidence in her own mind. And Mary, who had not been so treated by Providence, and whose love had not been happy, felt a hot flush of anger against the girl who stood there before her with ineffable smiles, not objecting to the young man's impetuosity, not even answering him a word.

"Violet!" she cried, "come away this instant. Do you know that you are defying both your mother and me?"

"You have always been my enemy, Mary," cried Val passionately, "and I don't know why, for I have always liked you. Vi, you are not going to do what she tells you —to follow her instead of me?"

"I am not going to follow any one," said Vi, detaching herself from his arm with much dignity ; then she stood at a little distance, and looked at him with tender glowing eyes. "Oh, Val!" she cried, "but I am glad to see you! I thought you would never come. I knew you would be here to-day. Val, are you well—are you quite well? Oh, what a weary, weary time it has been, when I thought I would never see you more!"

"Then you were thinking of me? and you don't mean to cast me off, Vi?"

"I—cast you off!—that is likely! Mary, you never were Val's enemy, though he says so, in his hasty way—he was always hasty. He made me give him my promise here, beneath this tree. I cannot take back my word ; I cannot say one thing to you and another to him ; and you never scolded me when I said—I—cared for Val, Mary! not a word! She only cried and gave me a kiss."

"And she ought to give me a kiss too," said bold Val, going up to Miss Percival, whose heart was melting altogether away in her bosom, and whose efforts to look stern were becoming almost ludicrous. The audacious boy went up to her, while Vi looked on thunderstruck at his boldness, and kissed Mary's cheek, which flushed crimson under the touch, making that middle-aged woman look a girl again. "How dare you?" she cried, putting up her hand to push him away ; but Mary's strength was not able to resist this. "God bless you!" she said, next moment, the tears coming to her eyes, "you bold boy! How dare you kiss me? Though I am your enemy, I've thought of you and prayed

for you morning and night ever since I parted from you, Val."

"I know that very well," said the young man, composedly ; "for whatever you may say, how could you be my enemy when I am fond of you ? You have not the heart not to help us, Mary. Come and sit down again and let us think what to do. Here is where we played truant when we were children. Here is where you brought us, Mary—you—when we were older ; and here is where Vi gave me her promise. This is the place of all others to meet again. As for any pretence of separating us, how can any one do it ? Think a little," said Val, standing before the fallen tree on which Vi had sat with poor Dick, and from which she now regarded him with soft eyes suffused with light and happiness. "Could they be hard upon *her*, for the first time in her life, and break her heart ? Is that reasonable ? As for me," the young man said, raising his head, while the two women looked at him with tender envy and admiration, "there is no interference possible. I am a man and my own master. So now that you are convinced," cried Valentine, putting himself beside Violet on the old trunk, which, old as it was, had put forth young shoots of life and hope to make itself fit for the throne of so much love and gladness, "let us consider what is the best means to clear these trifling temporary obstructions out of our way."

I don't think there is anything so silken-green, or that makes so tender a canopy over your head, and shows the sky so sweetly through them, as young beech-leaves in May, just shaken out of their brown busks, and reclothing, as if with tenderest ornaments of youth, the big branches that bear them. Stray airs rustled through them ; stray sunbeams, for the day was cloudy, came and went, penetrating now and then through the soft canopy—punctuating with sudden glow of light some one or other of those bold arguments of Val's, which told so well upon his sympathetic audience. Though Violet was not one of the worshipping maidens of modern story, but thought of Val only as Val, and not as a demigod, the soft transport of reunion, the glow of tender trust and admiration with which she regarded that delightful certainty of his, which no terrors shook, gave to her soft face a look of absolute dependence and devotion. She looked up to him, as they sat together holding each other's hands like two children, with a sentiment which

went beyond reason. He was no wiser nor cleverer, perhaps, than she was ; but he looked so strong and so sure, so much above feminine doubts and tremblings, that the mere sight of him gave confidence. As for Mary, seated on the green bank in front of these two, who was ever so much wiser and cleverer than Val (he had few pretensions that way), she, too, felt, with a kind of philosophical amusement at herself, the same sense of added confidence and moral strength as she looked at the boy whom she had watched as he grew up, and chided and laughed at—whose opinion on general subjects had no particular weight with her, yet who somehow gave to her experienced and sensible middle-age a sensation of support and certainty, which the wisest reason does not always communicate. Mary looked at the two seated there together, hand in hand, half-children, half-lovers, under the soft shadow of the young beech-leaves, with that “smile on her lip and tear on her eye” which is the most tender of all human moods. Pity and envy, and amusement, and an almost veneration, were in her thoughts. How innocent they were ! how sure of happiness ! how absolute in their trust in each other ! and, indeed (when the case was fairly set before them), in everybody else. Notwithstanding the one terrible shock his faith had received—a shock which happily had worked itself out in bodily illness, the most simple way—Val was still of opinion that, if you could but get to the bottom of their hearts, all the world was on his side. He had no fear of Violet’s mother, though for the moment she had crushed him ; and, to tell the truth, after his fever, Val had altogether forgotten Mr Pringle’s offence against him, and all the harm it had brought. Now that offence was more than past, for had it not been confessed and atoned for, a thing which makes a sin almost a virtue ? Nor was he alarmed when he thought of the old people at Rosscraig, who had humoured and served him all his life. What was there to fear ? “It would be against all reason, you know,” said Val, “if our course of true love had run quite smooth. We were miserable enough one time to make all right for the future ; but if you mean to be miserable any more, Vi, you must do it by yourself, for I shan’t take any share.”

When a young man thus makes light of all difficulties, what can a sympathetic woman do ? Before many minutes had passed, Miss Percival found herself pledged to brave

Violet's father and mother and overcome their objections. "They have never crossed her in their lives, and why should they now ?" said Valentine, with good sense, which no one could gainsay.

When this chief subject had been fully discussed, and all their plans settled, both the ladies drew close to him with breathless interest, while he told them the story of his own family. How Dick was his brother, which made Violet start and clasp her hands, saying, with a sudden outcry, "I always knew it !" and how his mother had come back with them—had come home. It was Mary who, much more than these two young people, who were so sure of each other, had her heart played upon like an instrument that day. She sat quite still and never said a word, while the story was told. I cannot describe her feelings towards the woman who (she felt, though she would not have acknowledged it) had been in the very bloom of her youth preferred to herself. It was not *her* fault ; up to this moment the woman who was Richard's wife had never so much as heard of Mary's existence ; no blame could possibly attach to her. A strange mingling of curiosity about her, interest, half-hostile, in her, wondering indignation, disapproval, proud dislike, all softening back into curiosity again, were in Miss Percival's mind ; but no one knew how she rung the changes upon these different sentiments as she sat quite still and quiet, listening, now and then asking a question, feeling as if her own life had come to some strange crisis, although she had absolutely nothing to do with it, not so much as one of the servants in the house. And then Valentine's way of speaking of his mother—the lower, hushed, respectful tone, the half-mystery, half-reverence, which he seemed disposed to throw around this gipsy, this tramp who had given them all so much trouble—gave Mary a secret offence, all the more sharp that she felt his feeling to be quite right and just and natural, and would not for the world have expressed her own. Just now, half an hour ago, he had put her in the place of his mother—had taken her interest for granted, had kissed her (the spot burned on Mary's cheek at the thought), and appealed to that strange sentiment in her heart which he seemed to be unconsciously aware of—that sense of the possibility that she might have been his mother, which was always more or less in her mind in Val's presence. He had taken possession of her in this way, of her sympathy and

help, telling her what she was to do, and how to do it, amusing her by his arbitrariness, while he melted her heart by his affectionate confidence. And now all at once, in the same breath almost, he began to talk of his real mother, this woman whom no one knew, who had done him and his family all the harm possible, and now was brought back almost in triumph to reap—not the whirlwind after having sown the wind—but happiness and calm weather, notwithstanding all her folly and ill-doing. Mary sat in a maze, in a dream, while all this went through her mind, yet with all her faculties alert, hearing everything and feeling everything. She was hurt even by Val's description of his mother's beauty, which filled Vi with such admiring interest. "Oh, how I should like to see her!" cried Violet. "You shall both see her," said Valentine, with the arbitrary determination to give pleasure of a young prince. How Mary's heart swelled! But if these two children had guessed what was going on in her mind, with what wondering grieved disapproval they would have looked upon her, troubled by a sense of natural incongruity that a woman of her age could possibly feel so! She felt this along with all the rest; and, in short, she was conscious of so many different sentiments, that all her vigour and natural power went out of her. Her heart was being lacerated by a hundred needle-points and pin-pricks—like a pin-cushion, she said, faintly trying to laugh to herself.

Val went with them to their carriage, which was waiting at the lower edge of the woods, in the opposite direction from Rosscraig, and took a farewell, which he declared to be the merest temporary good-bye, but which once more made Violet's eyes tearful. Vi grew less certain as she lost sight of him. Various unexpected results had followed the publication of that Apology, which in her youthful heat and energy she had almost forced her father into writing. Even Mrs Pringle had not seen the necessity for it so clearly as Violet did; and the world in general on both sides of the question had taken it, as Lord Eskside did, as a formal retraction, a bringing down to his marrow-bones of Sandy Pringle, rather than as the prompt and frank and generous apology of one gentleman to another. Some had said that it was fear of an action for libel which had moved him to such a step; others, with a frank malediction, had d——d him for not standing to what he said. Nobody had appre-

ciated his motive, or understood Violet's childlike reasoning on the abstract principle, that when you have done wrong and know it, there is no course possible but to confess the wrong and ask pardon of the injured person. This, I fear, is not a course of action at all congenial to the ordinary code ; and Mr Pringle, though carried away by the impetuosity of his daughter, had by this time repented his *amende honorable* quite as much as he repented the evil he had done. To suffer for doing wrong is reasonable ; but it is hard to be punished for doing right, and fills the sufferer's heart with bitterness.

Mr Pringle had been very penitent towards poor Val before the days of the Apology ; but now, in the sharpness of the sting of unappreciated virtue, he was furious against him. Violet knew this only too well, and her courage oozed out of her finger-ends as she saw the young hero disappear into the woods. "Do you think—do you really think—it is all as certain as he says ?" she said to Miss Percival, with tears in her soft eyes, which had been so bright with happiness and courage a moment before.

As for Valentine, he strode home through the woods very triumphant and joyful, as became a young lover ; but sobered as he drew near home. He made up his mind to go at once into the matter, and extort a consent from everybody ; but as he drew near and nearer to the turrets of Rosscraig, it became more and more apparent to him that there would be no small trouble and pain involved ; and he began to feel how disagreeable it is to displease and vex the people most near to you, even in order to secure for yourself the person dearest and nearest of all. This thought did not subdue his resolution, but it subdued his step, which became less and less rapid. Nothing in this world would have induced him to give up Vi ; but he did not like to defy his old grandfather, to make my lady set her lips firm in that way he knew so well. He wished intensely that Vi and he could have been happy without that ; but still, as it had to be done some time or other, it was better, much better, that it should be done at once. So, after walking very slowly the last mile of the way, he suddenly, to use his own phraseology, "put on a spurt," and skimmed over the last quarter of a mile, making up his mind, as if for an operation, to get it over. He walked straight into the library, still flushed from his long walk, and somewhat to his surprise found all

the family authorities collected there, my lord and my lady and his father, all apparently engaged in some mysterious consultation. Val remarked with bewilderment that his father, so placid usually and indifferent, was flushed like himself,—though with speech, not exercise,—and that Lord and Lady Eskside had both a doubtful tremulous aspect, and looked morally cowed, not convinced. To tell the truth, they had been arguing the question over again, whether it was possible to keep the secret of Dick's seniority from the two young men. It was Richard's desire that this should be done ; but he had not convinced the others either of the possibility or expediency of it, though, for the moment, they had come to a conditional bargain to say nothing unless circumstances should arise which made the disclosure necessary. This supposed emergency was to be left to each one's private judgment, I suppose, and therefore the secret was pretty sure of rapid revelation ; but still the old pair were not satisfied. "Good never came of falsehood, or even, that I know, of the mere *suppressio veri*," Lord Eskside had said, shaking his head, just as Val came in ; and they all turned to look at him, with a little wonder and excitement ; for he looked indeed very like a man who had found something out, coming in hot haste to tell it, and ask, Is this true ? The old lord and his wife looked at each other, both of them leaping to the conclusion that this was so, and that Val had discovered the secret ; and they were not sorry, but gave a little nod of secret intelligence to each other. Poor Val ! poor boy ! it was another trial for him ; and yet it was best, far best, that he should know.

"Grandfather," said Val, plunging at once into the subject, bringing in an atmosphere of fresh air and youthful eagerness with him, "I have come to tell you at once of something that has happened to me. It is strange to find you all sitting here, but I am heartily glad of it. My lady, you know how long it is since I first spoke to Violet——"

"Oh, Violet !" cried my lady, with an impatient movement of her head and stamp of her foot upon the carpet ; "Lord bless us ! is it this nonsense he has got in his head again ?"

"You may call it nonsense if you like," said Val, seeing somehow that what he had said was not what they expected, and unconsciously, in an under-current of thought, wondering what it was they had expected ; "it is not nonsense to me.

I went to Moray Place this morning, having heard nothing of her for a long time—and there Mrs Pringle received me very coldly—”

“That was unfortunate,” said Richard with a smile, which his son called a sneer; “that an Edinburgh lawyer’s wife should receive Lord Eskside’s grandson coldly, was, no doubt, something very miserable indeed—enough, I suppose, to justify this excitement,” and he looked at Val with an amused scrutiny from head to foot, which made the young man wild with irritation. He had stumbled into a burn on his way home, and had left, there was no denying it, one huge muddy foot-print on the spotless carpet, which had at once caught his father’s fastidious eye.

“The Edinburgh lawyer’s wife may not be much to you, sir,” said Val, “but she is a great deal to me; for she has my future wife’s comfort and happiness in her hand. I want to let you know at once that my mind is quite made up and decided. I told you so before. What is the use of wearing our hearts out by waiting and waiting?” cried Val, turning from one to another. “You are good and kind, why should you make me miserable? In everything else you have always tried to make me happy; you have listened to what I had to say; you have been always reasonable; why should you shut your hearts against me now, in the one matter that is most important to me, in that which must decide my happiness or misery all my life?”

“The argument is well put,” said the old lord, with exasperating composure; “but, Val, how can you tell at your age what is, or what is not, to decide the happiness of your life?”

“And don’t you see, Val,” said my lady, more sympathetically, “that it is just because it is so important that we cannot give our consent so easily? Oh, my dear, if you had wanted the moon we would have tried to get it for you; think, then, how strong a motive it must be that makes us cross you now!”

“What is the motive?” said Val, with sudden dramatic force, waiting solemnly for an answer. The two old people looked at each other again and trembled. What could they answer to this impetuous boy? The motive was that Violet was not a great match for him, such as they had hoped for—not any one who would bring him wealth or distinction, but only a girl whom he loved; and they quailed before the

boy's look. If they had been a worldly pair the answer would have been easy; but these two high-minded old people, who had trained him to scorn all that was mean, and to hold love high and honour, how were they to state this plain fact to a young lover of three-and-twenty? They did not know what words to use in which to veil their motive and give it some sort of grandeur worthy the occasion; and, unfortunately, Val saw his advantage as clearly as they saw the disadvantage under which they lay.

"You speak like a foolish boy," said his father. "It is enough that we think this match a very unfit one for you, and I hope you have sense enough yourself to see its unsuitability. Who is this girl? an Edinburgh lawyer's daughter—a man who has attacked your family in the basest and most treacherous way—"

"But who has apologised!" cried Val; "who has confessed he was wrong and begged pardon—"

"The more fool he," said Richard, "not to have strength of mind to stick to his slander when he had committed himself to it. Apology!—you mean retractation—extorted, no doubt, from him by fear of his pocket. It would be more dignified, no doubt, to pay the twopence-ha'penny he can afford to give her, as his daughter's portion, rather than as damages in a court of law."

"If it is a question of twopence-ha'penny," said Val, with a violent flush of sudden anger.

"My boy, you must not use that tone here," Lord Eskside interposed. "Your father is right. Is it your enemy that you want to ally yourself with? he that raked up the whole old story of your coming here, and tried to ruin you with it, using his falsehood for your destruction—"

"Grandfather," said Val, still flaming with nervous passion, "the sting of that story, I have always understood, was that it was not false but true."

"Val!" cried Lady Eskside; but there was a pause after this—and I think in the very heat of the discussion the old lord felt with secret pleasure that his boy had already made more than one point, even though it was against himself. Twice over Val had silenced the opposing forces. Now, but to live to see him facing the House of Commons like this, who could tell, from the Treasury bench itself! This delightful secret suggestion crept into Lord Eskside's heart, like a warm wind loosening the frosts.

"Then if you will only consider," said Val, changing his indignant tone for one of soft conciliation and pleading, "there is no one in Scotland, so far as I can see, so free to choose for myself as I am. If you were not what you are, sir, the first man in the county, as you ought to be—if my father were not what he is, distinguished in other circles than ours—then, perhaps, I, who as yet am nobody, might have required to look outside, to get crutches of other people's distinctions; but as it is, what does it matter? We are rich enough, we are more independent than the Queen, who, poor lady, must always consider other people, I suppose; whereas I, who am your grandson—and your son, sir—I," cried Val, "am more free than a prince to ask for love only and happiness! Give them to me," he said, holding out his hands with natural eloquence to the two old people, who sat looking at him, afraid to look at each other; "you never in all my life refused me anything before!"

I cannot tell how it was that this natural noble attitude in which his son stood, asking, like a loyal soul as he was, for that consent, without which he could not be wholly happy, to his happiness—affected almost to rage the mind of Richard, whose mode had been entirely the reverse; who had plucked in hot haste, without sanction or knowledge of any one, the golden apples which had turned to ashes and bitterness. To marry as he had done, wildly, hotly, in sudden passion,—is not that much more easily condoned by the great world in which he lived, which loves a sensation, than a respectable mediocre marriage, equally removed from scandal and from distinction? To marry a gipsy, or an opera-dancer, or a maid-of-all-work, is more pardonable, as being a piquant rebellion against all law and order, than it is to marry a virtuous person out of the lower circles of good society, sufficiently well-born and well-bred to make no sensation. The lawyer's daughter was gall to Richard. He interposed with one of those sudden fits of passionate irritability to which his smooth nature was liable.

"Do not let this folly go any further, Val. We all know what is meant by these ravings about love and happiness. Whatever place I may have gained among men it is not from having been my father's son; neither will that serve you as you think. Lord Eskside's grandson!" said Richard, with scorn on his lip; "how much will that do for the

younger of you two—the one who is not the heir,” he continued, with rising energy—“the one who has a second son’s allowance, a second son’s position; the one—whom we have all agreed in cheating out of his rights——”

“Dick?” said Val, with hesitation and wonder. He looked round upon them all, and saw something in their eyes which alarmed him he could not tell why: “Is it Dick?”

“Valentine,” said his father, suddenly coming up to him, seizing his arm, “it is not for me to speak to you of the miseries of a foolish marriage; but look here. Give up this boyish folly. You have a foundation, as you say, built up by those who have gone before you; you may make any match you please; you may cover all that has gone before with the world’s pardon and more than pardon. I look to you to do this. I can give you opportunities—you will have countless opportunities; give up this girl who is nobody—or if you refuse——”

“What then, sir, if I refuse?” Val loosed his arm from his father’s hold and stood confronting him, steadfast and erect, yet surprised and with a novel kind of pain in his eyes. The two old people gave one look at each other, then paused breathless to hear what was to come next, both of them aware that Richard, diplomatist as he was, forgot himself sometimes, and perceiving that the crisis, which in their previous talk they had prepared for, had now arrived.

“Then,” said Richard—he paused a moment, and all the old prick of a jealousy which he had despised himself for feeling, all the old jars of sensation at which he had tried to laugh, which had arisen out of the perpetual preference of Val to himself, surged up for one moment in his temper rather than his heart. The weapon lay at his hand so ready; the boy was somehow so superior, so irritating in his innocence. His face flushed with this sudden impulse to humiliate Val. “Then,” he said, “perhaps you will pause when I tell you, for your good, that you have totally mistaken your own position; that you are not the great man you think yourself; that though you have condescended to your brother, and patronised him, and been, as it were, his good genius, it is Dick who is Lord Eskside’s heir, and not you.”

Lady Eskside started with a low cry. It was because Dick had come in a moment before at the door, in front

of which his father and brother were standing ; but Richard thought her exclamation was because of what he said, and turned to her with a smile which it was not good to see.

“ Yes, mother,” he said, “ you wished him to know. *Benissimo!* now he knows. He has been the grand seigneur, and Dick has been nobody. Now the positions are reversed ; and I hope his magnanimity will bear it. Anyhow, now, with his second son’s allowance, he will be obliged to pause in this mad career.”

“ Is it so ? ” said Val, going forward to the table, and, I confess, leaning upon it a hand which trembled—for he had been thunderstruck by this revelation—“ is it so ? ” No one spoke ; and poor Val, standing there with his eyes cast down, had, I avow it, a bitter moment ; but the very sting of the shock stimulated him, and called all his faculties together. After that minute, which felt like a year, he raised his head with a glimmer of painful moisture in his eyes, but a faint smile. “ Well,” he said, “ at all events there can never more be any doubt about me, who I belong to, or what position I hold. I wish Dick all the luck in the world, and he deserves it. He’ll be sorrier than I am,” said Val. “ What, grandmamma, crying ! Not a bit of it ! I shall be as happy as the day is long with my second son’s allowance ; and Vi !—for of course,” he added, with a bright defiant smile all round, “ there can be no possible objection to Vi now.”

Dick had been standing quite still behind, moved not by curiosity, but by that respectful attention to the preoccupation of the others, which I suppose his former lowliness had put into him, though it is the highest grace of a gentleman. He had heard everything, indeed, but his mind was too full of something else to care for what he had heard. He broke in here, with a new subject, in a voice hoarse with anxiety and emotion. “ Has any one seen my mother ? ” said Dick. “ I have been all over the house looking for her, high and low.”

CHAPTER XLII.

THAT had been a weary morning in the new wing. Dick had gone to Edinburgh with his brother, half by way of seeing the beautiful town, half to console Val, who was very eager and anxious. With a curious interest he had walked about Moray Place, to which he had directed his letters in the strange old time when he was still Dick Brown,—a time which it gave him a certain vertigo to think of. And I am sorry to say that Val, in the heat of disappointment, when he came out from Mrs Pringle's presence, forgot that his brother was walking about on the other side of the square waiting for him, and had rushed back to Lasswade without ever thinking of Dick. When he saw that he had been forgotten, Dick too made his way to the railway, and went back ; but it was afternoon when he arrived at RossCraig. He had never left his mother for so long a time before, and this, no doubt, had its effect upon her. She was alone in the beautiful rooms of the new wing all the morning. It was like a silent fairy palace, where everything was done by mysterious unseen hands ; for the sight of servants fretted her, and she would not admit any personal attendance. She had grown feeble in that lonely splendour without any notice being taken of it ; for Dick, with the inexperience of youth, made no observations on the subject, and to Lady Eskside, who visited her every day, she asserted always that she was quite well. More feeble than ever she had got up that morning, and dressed herself as usual, and taken her sparing breakfast with Dick. After the first few days, Lady Eskside had yielded to this arrangement, seeing it impossible, at least for the moment, to habituate the newcomer to the family table. "If it is such a distress to her, why should we force her to it ?" said my lady, not without offence ; and the poor soul was grateful for the exemption. "Don't find fault with me, Dick," she said to him faintly ; "it can't be for long. I'll get used to it, and easy in my mind before long ;"—and therefore she had been sorrowfully left to herself in the beautiful new rooms furnished for her three-and-twenty years before. When Dick left her she went to a little room in the front part of the wing, which looked out upon the great door and court, where she sat

watching till the two young men went away, and waved her hand in answer to their salutations. Valentine had already paid her a visit in the morning, a visit which he never neglected ; and wherever they were going, the young men never forgot to look up to that window from which it was her pleasure to watch their movements, one of the few pleasures she had.

When they had left the house she had no more interest in it. She wandered back again through various empty rooms to the great handsome sitting-room which had a light-some bow-window looking out upon the sloping bank of wood down to where the Esk foamed and tumbled below. Had she had any work to do, as in the days when she was Dick's housekeeper, and kept all his treasures in order, and prepared his simple meals, she might have forgotten herself and got through the weary hours. But she had nothing to do, poor soul ! She sat down in the window, and passed she did not know how long a time there, gazing vaguely out, sometimes thinking, sometimes quite vacant : in so hazy a state was her mind that it seemed to her sometimes that soft Thames flowed at her feet instead of the brawling Esk ; and that she was waiting till Mr Ross's boat should come down the gentle river. Poor bewildered soul ! a haze of times and places, of the vacant present, and the gleams of interest which had been in the past, possessed her mind ; she scarcely could have told where she was had any one asked her. The silence grew painful to her brain, and reeled and rustled round her in eddies of suppressed sound all centring in herself ; and now and then the light swam in her eyes, and darkened, and there was an interval in which everything was black around her, and all that she was aware of was that rustle, overpowering in its intensity, of the silence, raying out in circles, like those in water, from her brain. I almost think she must have lapsed into some kind of faint, without knowing it, in those moments. About noon Lady Eskside came to see her, and did, as she always did, her very utmost to win some sort of hold upon her. She talked to her of the boys, of Val who must soon go to London, of trifles of every description, working hard to rouse her to some interest. "I wish you would come with me," my lady said ; and she was glad afterwards that she had said it. "I am alone, and we would be cheerier together, we two women, when all the others are away. Won't you come

with me, Myra ? My woman, you look lonely here." "I am used to be alone," she said quite gently, but without moving ; and half provoked, half sorry, the old lady had at last gone away, despairing in her mind, and wondering whether it had been kind to bring this wild creature here even in her subdued state, and whether she would ever find any comfort in her life. "Perhaps when Richard goes," Lady Eskside said to herself ; for Richard's influence did not seem to be advantageous to his wife, though he was very careful, very anxious, not to step over the distance which she had tacitly placed between them, though strangely tantalised and excited by it, as his mother saw. What was to be done ? The old lady shook her head, and took refuge with her old lord in the library, not saying anything to him to vex him, for what could he do ? but finding a little consolation in her own vexation and perplexity in being near him. How different that silent support and society was from the solitude in the new wing, and even from Richard's dainty and still retirement, where he wrote his letters, with his noiseless Italian servant close at hand to answer every call ! It eased my lady's old heart, which had felt so many pains, only to walk into the library where her old lord sat, and put up the window, or down the window, and look at the letters on his table, and say something about the weather or the garden—just as it eased Lord Eskside, when he was in any perplexity, to go into the drawing-room, and pronounce the novel on her table to be "some of your rubbish, my lady," and let her know that the glass was falling, and that she had better take precautions about her drive. Lady Eskside wondered with a sigh whether it would ever be possible to bring her new guest—her strange daughter-in-law—into the household life. She meant nothing but kindness towards her ; but there was—how could she help it ?—a little impatience in the sigh.

After that visit the recluse in the new wing was left to herself again, and all kinds of strange thoughts came up into her heart. They were not so articulate as Lady Eskside's ; but somehow there arose in her, as the old lady went away, a curious reflection of her impatience, an incoherent desire to call her back again. She sat and listened to her steps going all the way along the corridor, and down the stair, and never opened her lips nor made a movement to detain her ; and yet there rose in her mind a mute cry,

could the dull air but have carried it without any action of hers. She caught the sound of Lady Eskside's sigh, and, for the first time, a dim understanding of it seemed to dawn upon her mind. Why could not she go with her—make herself one with the others? The thought was very shadowy and vague, like a suggestion some unseen observer had made to her; but it raised a visionary ferment in her soul, a gasping for breath, as if she already felt herself confined within an atmosphere where she had no room to breathe.

Then she took refuge in her own room in this painful rush of new feeling. The curtains at the windows, the hangings of the bed, the draperies everywhere, seemed to shut her in and cut short her breath. The great glass which reflected her figure from head to foot, the other lesser ones which multiplied her face, glancing back resemblances at her as if she, in her solitude, had grown into half-a-dozen women, affected her imagination wildly. She left that room like one pursued—pursued by herself, always the worst ghost of solitude. Then she went to the little room with the window which commanded the great door. Perhaps by this time the boys might be come back; and the boys formed her bridge, as it were, into the world, her sole link of connection with life in this artificial phase. A little warmth, a little hope, came into her as she sat down there and strained her eyes to watch for some sign of their coming. After a while, the door opened and Richard came out. He stood on the great steps for a moment, putting on his gloves, then, looking up, saw her, and took off his hat to her; then he made a pause, as if in doubt, drew off the gloves again, and went back into the house. At this sight a sudden wild panic came upon her. She thought he was coming to see her, which indeed was the purpose with which he had turned back. She sprang up, her heart beating, and flying through the lonely rooms, seized a shawl which lay on a chair, and darted down a little stair in the turret which led into the woods. Her excitement carried her on for some distance before her breath failed her altogether, though her heart beat loud in her bosom, like some hard piston of iron, swinging and creaking in fierce unmanageable haste. She had got into the shrubberies, not knowing where she went, and sank down among the bushes to rest, when her strength failed. The thought of meeting her husband now, with nobody by, drove her wild. She had lived under the same roof with him for days at Oxford, and thought little of it,

being occupied with other matters ; but deadly panic, as of a wild deer flying from the hunter, had seized upon her now. She never asked herself what harm he could do her. She feared nothing actual, but, with overwhelming blind terror, she feared the future and the unknown.

Oh, how many thoughts came rushing upon her as she lay crouched together on the cool earth among the bushes ! —thoughts half made out, not one altogether articulate—gleams of a consciousness that this was folly, that it was impossible, that she *must* get the better of herself, that the fever in her soul *must* be chased away, and could not be submitted to. “I must change—I must make a change !” she moaned to herself. A whole new being, a new creature, with dim evolutions of reason, dim perceptions of the impossible, seemed to be rising up in her, blotting out the old. Her faults, her follies, her wild impulses, the savage nature which could endure no restraint, had all come to a climax in her ; and reason, which had struggled faintly in the old days, and won her to so many sacrifices, had at last got the balance in hand, I think, and the power to decide what could and what could not be. Yet, when she had got her breath a little, she stumbled to her feet, and went on.

When Dick came back she was not to be found in her rooms, which troubled him greatly ; for she had never before gone out by herself. He searched through every corner, then went to the other parts of the house—to the drawing-room, to Lady Eskside’s rooms, to Val’s—hopeless of finding her, indeed, yet so confident that something must have happened, that no marvel would have surprised him. When he burst into the library he was in despair. And this new alarm, so suddenly introduced among them, diverted them at once from the other subject, which had lost its entralling and exciting power now that the secret had been made known. Richard Ross had not been spending a pleasant afternoon. He was excited by Val’s defiance, and he had been excited before. He turned very pale as Dick spoke. He knew that his wife had fled out of the house to avoid him—a thing which, naturally enough, had tried his temper greatly. Where had she gone ? He remembered that when he looked down the winding staircase in the turret, through which she had evidently fled, the fresh air blowing in his face had brought with it a sound of the Esk tumbling over its rocks. This had not alarmed him then, and he had scorned to follow

the fugitive, or to force her into an interview she avoided, in this way ; but now suddenly it returned to him with an indescribable shock of terror. He went out without saying a word to any one, moved by sudden panic. The others started to explore the woods ; the idea of the river did not occur to either of the young men, who knew her better than Richard did. They set off both together ; while Lord Esk-side, with the servants, undertook to search the gardens and shrubberies nearer home. "Oh, God forgive her if she's gone away again !" cried the old lady, wringing her hands. "I can't think that she's gone away," said Dick. His face was very grave. He scarcely said a word to Val, who went with him, and who tried anxiously to ascertain from him what it was he really feared. Dick kept silent, his heart too strained and sore for speech.

As for Val, he was swept out of one excitement and plunged into another without a moment's interval to take breath in, and the fresh air did him good. I need not say of a public-school boy and well-trained "man," that he had picked himself up, to use an undignified but useful expression, ere now, and betrayed, neither in look nor tone, the sudden blow he had received. For that grace, if no other, let our English education be blessed. Val had no idea of contending, of "making a row," or of bearing malice. If the right was Dick's, why, then, the right was Dick's,—and there was nothing more to be said. If his mind was momentarily weak and unable to seize all that was going on, he did not show it, except by a certain mental feebleness and want of his usual energy, which made him disposed to take Dick's lead rather than to form any opinion of his own. But even this lasted only a short time. "Come," said Val, drawing a long breath, "why should we be so downhearted ? She has gone out to take the air—to enjoy the—good weather."

He had meant to say the beautiful afternoon ; but then it suddenly occurred to him that the day was dull and cloudy, and that the gleams of sunshine which had been so sweet were gone.

"She never took her walk without me before," said Dick. "Oh, why did I stop away so long ? I can't tell you what a weight I have here at my heart."

"Cheer up, old fellow !" said Val, thrusting his arm into his brother's : "things will go better than you think. What

harm could happen? She was not ill; and the woods are innocent woods, with no precipices in them, or pitfalls. I roamed about them all day long when I was a child, and nothing ever happened to me."

Dick shook his head; but he was cheered in spite of himself, and began to have a little hope. The woods were alive with sound on that dim afternoon. The sun, indeed, was not shining, but the atmosphere was soft with spring, and all the light airs that were about came and rustled in the leaves, and tossed the light twigs which could not resist them. The birds were twittering on every branch, scarcely singing, for they missed the sun, but getting through all that melodious dramatic chatter which they do ordinarily in the early morning, before their professional life, so to speak, as minstrels of the universe, has begun. Everything was soft, harmonious, subdued—no high notes, either of colour or sound, but every tone gentle, low, and sweet. Even Esk added with a mellow note his voice to the concert. It seemed impossible to conceive of anything terrible, any grief that rends the heart, any failure of light and life, upon such a subdued and gentle day. The young men went far,—much further, alas! than they needed to have gone—almost as far as the linn,—before Dick remembered that it was impossible she could have walked to that distance. "I am thinking of her as she was in the old times," said Dick, "when she would get over a long bit of road, always so quiet, not one to talk much, looking as if she saw to the end, however far it was; but she couldn't do that now. Now I think of it," said Dick, "she's failed these last days."

"I do not think it, Dick. Your fears make you see the gloomy side of everything."

"It ain't my fears; it's somehow borne in upon me. Please God," said Dick, devoutly, "that we find her, she shan't be left to herself again without being looked after. No, no one is to blame—except me that should have known."

"Do you think it has harmed her to bring her here?" Val spoke humbly, with a sudden sense of some failure on his own part of duty towards her; for indeed he had taken his mother's strange ways for granted, as children so often do.

"It couldn't be helped, anyhow," said Dick—"she had to come;" and then he paused and thought all at once of the bank of primroses, which was a mile at least nearer home

than they were now. He put his hand on Val's arm, and turned back. "I have thought of a place to look for her," he cried.

The spot was deep in the silence of the woods, great trees standing round about, one a huge old beech, every branch of which looked like a tree in itself. Underneath it, in a curious circle, was a ring of juniper-bushes, deep funereal green, contrasting with the lighter silken foliage above. Close to this rose the low knoll, a deeper cool green than either, all carpeted with the primrose-leaves. Something red lying there showed a long way before they reached the knoll through the trees ; but it was not till they were quite close to it that they saw her whom they sought. She was lying in a natural easy attitude reclined on the green bank. With one hand she seemed to be groping for something among the leaves, and it was only when they were within sight that she dropped back as if in fatigue, letting her head droop upon the rich herbage. "Mother !" Dick cried ; but she did not move. Her consciousness was gone, or going. How long she had been there no one ever knew. Her strength had failed entirely when she had sat down among the flowers, after struggling through the bushes as on a pilgrimage to that natural shrine which had caught her sick fancy. She had a few of the primroses in her lap, and one or two in her hand. The very last, one large star-like flower just out of her reach, was the only other that remained, and she had fallen as if in an overstrain, trying to reach this. Her face was perfectly pallid, like white marble, contrasting with the brilliant colour of her shawl, as she lay back among the leaves. Her eyes were open, and seemed to be looking at the boys as they approached ; but there was no intelligence or consciousness in them. Her lips were parted with a long-drawn struggling breath.

"Mother !" Dick cried, kneeling down by her side. She stirred faintly, and tried to turn towards the voice. "Mother, mother !" he repeated passionately ; "you're tired only ? not ill, not ill, mother dear ?"

Once more she made a feeble effort to turn to him. "Ay, Dick," she said, "ay, lad—that's—what it is. I'm tired—dead tired ; I don't know—how I am to get afoot—again."

"Don't lose heart," he cried, poor fellow—though every look he gave her took all heart from him—there's two of us

here to help you, mother, Val and me. Try to rouse up once more, for Val's sake, if not for mine."

She made no answer to this appeal ; perhaps she was past understanding it ; her fingers fumbled feebly with the primroses ; "I came out—for some flowers," she said,—"but I didn't bring—no basket ; ay, lad—it is a long way—and it's dark. Is there a tent—Dick ? or where are we—to sleep to-night ?"

"Mother, mother dear—home is close by—for God's sake come home !"

"That—I will !" she said, her voice low and dull and broken, contrasting strangely with the apparent heartiness of the words. Then she raised her head feebly for a moment, and looked at them with her eyes expanding in great circles of light—light which was darkness ; and then dropped back again heavily, upon the green primrose-leaves.

"Has she fainted ?" said Valentine, in terror.

"Go and fetch some one !" cried Dick, imperiously commanding his brother for the first time—"something to carry her home." He was master of the moment, in his sudden perception, and in the grief which he only could fully feel. He did not say what had happened, but he knew it to the depths of his heart. She had not fainted. She had got away where this time no one could follow her, or bring her back any more.

Val rushed through the trees to the broad footpath, to obey his brother's orders, dismayed and anxious, but with no suspicion of what had really taken place ; and there met a pony-carriage which Lady Eskside had sent after them, judging that if the poor wanderer were found, she might be too weary to walk back. Val returned immediately to where his mother lay, hoping, with a strange nervous dread which he could not account for, that she might have changed her position, and closed her eyes ; for there was something that appalled him, he could not tell why, in the brilliancy of that look, which did not seem to direct itself to anything, not even to her sons. Dick raised her with difficulty in his arms, showing his brother without a word how to help him. And thus they made their way painfully through the brushwood. How heavy, how still, how motionless, how awful was their burden ! Val's heart began to beat as hers had done so short a time before. Was this how people looked when they fainted ? Before they reached the pony-carriage he was

exhausted with the strain, which was both physical and mental. He was afraid of her, not knowing what had happened to her. "Should not we get water—something to revive her?" he said, panting, as she was laid down in the little carriage. Dick only shook his head. "Lead the pony very gently," he said to his brother; and Val once more did what he was told—humbly sending the servant who had brought it, on before them, to announce their coming, and to get the doctor. And thus her boys, all alone, no one with them, brought her home. It was what she would have chosen, poor soul! had she been able to choose.

I need not describe the commotion and excitement in Rossraig when this piteous procession came to the door. Dick supporting her who needed no support; Val, with subdued looks, leading the pony. They carried her up-stairs into her own room between them, letting no one else touch her; and I think that, by that time, Val knew, as well as Dick. But of course all kind of vain attempts were made to bring her to herself, till the doctor came, who looked at her, and then sent all the foolish ministrations away. Richard Ross, coming in very white and worn from the river-side, where he had found nothing, met Mrs Harding coming down-stairs with solemn looks, but did not stop to question her. He went straight up into the rooms where up to this time there had existed a kind of moral barricade against him which he had seldom ventured to face. All was open now to him or any one. He could go where he pleased, penetrating into the very chamber a little while ago more closely shut against him than any Holy of Holies, where his wife lay. They had pulled away, for the sake of air, all the curtains and draperies which a few hours before had stifled her very soul; and there she lay, unveiled as yet, a marble woman, white and grand, with everything gone that detracted from her beauty. Her eyes were half closed, revealing still a glimmer under the long eyelashes, which had never showed as they did now, against the marble whiteness of her cheek. The kerchief on her head had fallen off, and the long dark hair framed the white face. The living woman had been beautiful with a beauty that was passing—the dead woman was sublime in a beauty that would last, in the eyes that saw her now, for ever. Richard thrust the doctor out of his way, who turned to speak to him. He put Val away with the other hand, and went up close to the bedside. What

thoughts passed through his mind as he stood there ! Sorrow, a certain indignation, a profound and mournful pity. It was she who had wronged him, not he who had wronged her ; and there she lay, for whom he had lost his life, and who had never been his. His cold bosom swelled with an emotion greater than he knew how to account for. She was so beautiful that he was proud of her even at this last moment, and felt his choice justified ; but she had got away for ever without one sign, without one word, to show that she had ever thought of him. He had given up everything for her, and she had never been his.

“Richard, Richard, come away,” said his mother, laying her hand on his arm ; “we can do her no good now ; and she had her boys with her, thank God, at the last.”

“Her boys !” he said, with a deep breath which was tremulous with injured love, with wounded pride, with unspeakable minglings of indignant sorrow. “I am her husband, mother, and she has gone without one word to me.”

Then he turned, and, without looking at any one, went away.

CHAPTER XLIII.

I DO not mean to pretend to the reader that, after that one moment of complicated anguish, swelling of the heart almost too great for a man’s bosom who was too proud to show any sign, Richard sorrowed long or deeply for his wife, or that this strange blow was profoundly felt as a grief by the awed and saddened household. That was scarcely possible : though the sorrowful pity for a life thus wasted, and which had caused the waste of another, was more deep and less unmixed in the minds of the old people after the death of Richard’s wife than it could be while she was living, and proving still how impossible it was by any amount of kindness to bring her to share their existence. Neither could Val grieve as Dick did. He grieved with his imagination, seeing all the sadness of this catastrophe, and touched with tender compunctions, and thoughts of what he might have done but did not, as every sensitive soul must be when the gate of death has closed between it and those who have

claims upon its affection. He was very, very sorry for poor Dick, whose grief was real and profound ; and deeply touched by the memory of his mother whom he had known so little. But what more could he feel ? and soon life took its usual course again. The house was saddened and stilled in its mourning—but it was relieved also. “She never could have been happy here ; and where, poor soul, would she have been happy ?” Lady Eskside said, dropping a natural tribute of tears to her memory. It was sad beyond measure, but yet it was a relief as well.

Very soon, too, after this, it became necessary for Val to go to London, and for the whole system of the family affairs to be rearranged. Dick had not taken the slightest notice of the revelation which he had heard that day at the library door, if, indeed, he had heard it at all. A day or two, however, before the time fixed for Val’s departure, he appeared in the library, where once more his grandparents were seated together, leading his brother with him. It was about a month after the mother’s death, getting towards the end of June ; and the windows were all open. Lady Eskside had come in from the lawn where she had been walking, with a white shawl over her cap (the old lady disliked black—but white is always suitable with mourning, as well as very becoming to a fair old face, soft with pearly tints of age, yet sweet with unfading bloom) ; on a garden-seat within sight Richard sat reading, looking out now and then from his book on the lovely familiar landscape. The old lord, I need not say, was seated at his writing-table, with the last number of the ‘Agricultural Journal’ near him, and a letter, just begun, on his desk, to the editor, in which he was about to give very weighty advice to the farming world on the rotation of crops. Thus, when the two young men came in, the whole family was within reach, all stilled and quieted, as a family generally is after a domestic loss, even when there is no profound grief. Dick was the most serious of all. There was that expression about his eyes which tears leave behind, and which sad thoughts leave—a look that comes naturally to any mourner who has strained his eyes gazing after some one who has gone. Val was the only exception to the generally subdued look of the party. He was excited ; two red spots were on his cheeks, his eyes were shining with animation and energy ; he went to the window, said a few half-whispered words to Lady Eskside, then beckoned to his

father, who came slowly in and joined them. Dick sat listlessly down near the old lady. He was the only one who seemed indifferent to what was coming, and indeed suspected nothing of any special importance in this family meeting.

"Grandfather," said Val, "I have something to say. I am going away soon, you know, and I should like everything to be settled first. There have been so many changes lately, some of them sad enough," and he laid his hand caressingly on Dick's shoulder, by whom he stood. "We can't get back what has gone from us," said Val, his eyes glistening, "or make up for anything that might have been done differently; but at least we must settle everything now." Then there was a little pause, and he added with a smile half frank, half embarrassed, "It seems very worldly-minded, but I should like to know what I am to have and how things are to be."

"It is very reasonable," said Lord Eskside.

"First of all," said Val, "I want to keep my seat now I've got it. I don't grudge anything to Dick—it isn't that; but as there was a great deal of trouble in getting it, and expense—no, I don't mean to be a humbug; that isn't the reason. There's nothing to prevent the younger son being member for Eskshire, is there, sir? and I want it—that's the short and long of the matter—unless you say no."

"He ought to have the seat," said Richard. "It is a little compensation for the disappointment; besides, Val is better qualified—"

"And again," said Val, hurriedly, to prevent the completion of this sentence, "I want to know, sir, and Dick ought to know—"

Dick interrupted him, raising his head. "What is this about?" he asked; "has it anything to do with me?"

"It has everything to do with you," said his father. "He knows, does not he? Dick, I was told you were present and heard what I said—which perhaps was foolishly said at that moment. We had always thought your brother was the eldest and you the youngest. Now it turns out the other way. You are the eldest son. Of course this changes Valentine's prospects entirely; and it is well that you, too, should look your new position in the face as my father's heir."

"I!—Lord Eskside's heir?" said Dick, rising to his feet,

not startled or wondering, but with a smile. "No, no, you are mistaken; that is not what you mean."

"Unfortunately there is no possibility of being mistaken," said Richard. "Yes, Val, it is unfortunate; for you have been brought up to it and he has not. But, my boy," he said, turning to Dick kindly, though it was with an effort, "we none of us grudge it to you; you have behaved in every way so well, and so like a gentleman."

"Perfectly well—as if I had trained him myself," said my lady, drying her eyes, "notwithstanding that we feel the disappointment to Val." The old lord did not say anything, but he watched Dick very closely from under his shaggy brows.

Dick looked round upon them for a moment, quiet and smiling softly as if to himself at some private subject of amusement. Then he looked at Lady Eskside. "Do you believe it too, *you*, my lady," he said in an undertone, with a half reproach. After this, turning to the others again, his aspect changed. He grew red with rising excitement, and addressed them as if from some platform raised higher than they were. "I am a very simple lad," he said; "I don't know how your minds work, you that are gentlemen. In my class it would be as plain as daylight—at least I think so, unless I'm wrong. What do you mean, in the name of heaven, you that are gentlemen? Me to come in and take Val's name and place and fortune! me, Forest Myra's son—Dick Brown!—that he took off the road and made a man of when we were both boys. What have I done that you should name such a thing to me?"

The men all looked at him, abashed and wondering. Lady Eskside alone spoke. "Oh, Dick, my boy!" she said, holding out her hand to him, "that was what I said; that was what I knew you would say."

"And that is just what must not be said," said the old lord, rising from his seat. "My man, you speak like a man; and don't think you are not understood. But it cannot be. There are three generations of us here together. A hardship is a hardship, meant to be endured; and I would not say but to bear it well was as great an honour to the family as to win a battle. We are three generations here, Dick, and we can't put the house in jeopardy, or trust its weal to a hasty generosity, that your son, if not you, would

repent of. No, no. God bless you, my man ! you are the eldest, and everything will be yours."

This time Dick laughed aloud. "When two noes meet," he said, "one must give in, sir. I'll not give in. I say it to your face ; and yours, sir ; and yours, Val. You may speak till Doomsday, but I'll not give in ; not if the world was to come to an end for it. Look here : I am *her* son as well as Val. I can go further off, more out of your reach, than ever she did—God bless her ! And I'm a man, and you can't stop me. If there's another word about me taking Val's place, (a farce ! as if I ever would do it !) that day I'll go !—that moment I'll go ! and, do what you please, you can't bring *me* back. But I don't want to go," Dick said, after a pause, in a softened voice ; "I ain't one to wander ; I'm fond of a home. What I'd like would be to stay quiet, and stand by the old folks, and be of some use to Val. Father and grandfather ! I've never made bold to call you so before ; don't drive me away ! Val, speak for me ! for God's sake, don't make a Cain of me—an outcast—a tramp !"

"It is not in your nature," said Richard, with a smile.

"You don't know what's in my nature. You didn't know what was in *her* nature," said Dick, with sudden passion. "I'll not do this, so help me God !" He snatched up Lady Eskside's big Bible with the large print, from the table, and kissed it, tremulous with excitement. Then, putting it reverently down again, went and threw himself at the feet of the old lady. "Put your hand on my head," said Dick, softly, "my lady, as she used to do."

"I will—I will, my dear !" said Lady Eskside.

And to be sure this was how it ended. All the more for their wish that it should be so, the family, in its three generations, struggled against Dick's persistence, calling in external testimony—as that of Willie Maitland—to prove how impossible any such arrangement was. Dick never allowed himself to be excited again ; but he held by his vow, and nothing that could be said moved him. Sometimes he would get up in the midst of a discussion, and go away, crying out impatiently that they were tiring him to death,—the only time he was disrespectful in word or look to the elders of the party. Sometimes he bore it all, smiling ; sometimes he threatened to go away. I think it

was by the interposition of Sandy Pringle's good sense that it was settled at last—Sandy Pringle the younger, a very rising young lawyer, much thought of in the Parliament House. Val had sought Sandy out almost as anxiously as he sought Violet, to beg his pardon for that unadvised blow, and to secure his interest (for is not a friend, once alienated, then recovered, twice a friend ?) with his parents. Sandy was the first of the Pringle family reintroduced after the quarrel to Rossraig. He took Dick's side energetically and at once, with that entire contempt for the law which I believe only great lawyers venture to entertain. I don't pretend to understand how he managed it, or how far the bargain which was ultimately made was justifiable, or whether it would stand for a moment if any one contested it. Such arrangements do exist, they say, in many great families, and Sandy had a whole list of them at his fingers'-ends, with which he silenced Lord Eskside. One enormous point in his favour was that Valentine, being already known and acknowledged as Lord Eskside's eldest grandson and heir, active measures would have been necessary on Dick's part to establish his own claims—measures which Dick not only would not take, but refused all sanction to. And howsoever it was brought about, this I know, that Val is the eldest son, and Dick the youngest, *de facto*, if not *de jure*, to the absolute contentment of everybody concerned ; and that this secret, like every other honest secret, is known to a dozen people at least, and up to this time has done nobody any harm.

And I will not attempt to linger at this advanced period of my story, or to tell all the means by which the Pringles, on one side, and the Rosses on the other, were brought to consent to that unalterable decision of the young people, which both Val and Vi believed themselves to have held to with resolution heroical through trials unparalleled. Reflect with yourself, kind reader, how long, if you have an only daughter, your middle-aged sternness could hold out against the tears in her sweet eyes ?—reflect how long you could stand out against your boy—the fine fellow who is your pride and glory ? There are stern parents, I suppose, in the world, but I fully confess they are beings as much beyond my comprehension as megatheriums. If the young people hold out, tenderly and dutifully as becomes them, the old people must give in. Is it not a law of nature ? I do

not advise you, boys and girls, to flout and defy us all the same ; for that brings into action a totally different order of feelings,—a different set of muscles, so to speak, producing quite different results. But as my boy and girl, in the present case, heartily loved their fathers and mothers, and were incapable of disrespect towards them, the natural consequence came about in time, as how should it not ? Lord and Lady Eskside and Mr and Mrs Pringle, and even the Honourable Richard Ross, in Florence, gave in accordingly, and consented at last. This process occupied the time until the beginning of the next summer from these events ; and then, on the first day in June (not May, the virgin month, which is, as everybody in Scotland knows, fatally unlucky for marriages) Valentine and Violet were made one, and all their troubles (they thought, like a pair of babies) came to an end. The wedding feast, out of consideration for the old people, was held at Rosscraig ; but I will tell the reader of only one incident which occurred at that feast, or after it, and which has no particular connection either with the bridegroom or the bride.

Richard Ross had come from Florence to be present at his son's marriage ; and there, too, was Miss Percival, who had been much longer absent from her old friend than was usual, the episode of Richard's wife having interposed a visionary obstacle between them which neither could easily break. At this genial moment, however, Mary forgot herself, and returned to all her old habits in the familiar house. It was she and Dick—who immediately fell in love with each other—who arranged everything, and made the wedding party so completely successful. After the bridal pair had gone, when the guests were dispersing, and Mary's cares over, she came out on the terrace before the windows to breathe the fresh air, and have a moment's quiet. Here Richard joined her after a while. Richard Ross was fifty, but his appearance was exactly what it had been ten years before, and I am not sure that he was not handsomer then than at five-and-twenty. Mary was a few years younger—a pretty woman of her age—with hair inclining towards grey, and eyes as bright as they had ever been. I do not think it failed to strike either of them with a curious thrill of half sympathy, half pain, that they two might have been—nay, almost, ought to have been—the father and mother, taking a conjugal stroll in the quiet, after their son had

departed in his youthful triumph, feeling half sad, half glad that his time had begun and theirs was over—yet so far from really feeling their day to be over, that the sadness was whimsical, and amused them. I think they both felt this, more or less, and that Mary's secret grudge at having been, as it were, cheated out of the mothering of Val, had been strong in her mind all day. They looked together over the lovely woods, all soft with the warmth of June, down to where the Esk, never too quiet, played like a big baby with the giant boulder which lay mid-stream, just as he turned round the corner of the hill. The two figures on the terrace were in shade, but all the landscape was shining in the June sunshine. It was a moment to touch the heart.

"You and I have looked at these woods often together, Mary, in many different circumstances," said Richard, with a touch of sentiment in his voice.

"Yes, indeed—often enough," she said, compelling herself to laugh.

"And now here have the young ones set out, and we remain. I often wonder if you and I had come together a quarter of a century ago, as seemed so natural—as I suppose everybody wished—"

"Except ourselves," said Mary, her heart fluttering, but putting forth all her most strenuous powers of self-command.

"Except—ourselves? Well, one never knows exactly what one did wish at that time," said Richard; "everything that was least good, I suppose. We are very reasonable at our present age, Mary; and I think we suit each other. Suppose you have me now?"

"Suppose—what?" she asked, with surprise.

"I think we suit each other; and my mother would be more pleased than words can tell. Suppose you have me, now?"

He held out his hand to her, standing still; and she turned and looked at him steadily, gravely, the flutter utterly stilled in her heart.

"No, Richard, thank you," she said. "It is too late for that sort of thing now."

He shrugged his shoulders as he looked at her. "Well—if you think so," he said; and they walked together once more to the end of the terrace. I suppose he could have gone on quite steadily, as if nothing had happened; but Mary was not capable of this. When they turned again,

she broke away from him, saying something incoherent about my lady calling her—which was not the case, of course. Mary found it unpleasant to be near him all day after this; and in the languor of the waning afternoon, when all the guests were gone, she escaped to the woods, where Dick followed her, anxious too to escape from his own thoughts. But yet what kind thoughts these were!—what an exquisite, gentle melancholy it was that moved poor Dick, infinitely sad, yet sweeter than being happy! He had a feeling for Violet which he had never had for any woman—which he believed he never would have again for any woman—and she was his brother's wife, God bless her! Dick was right in that last thought. He would never think of any other again as he had thought of Vi; but for all that his wound was not a deadly wound, and his love was of the imagination rather than the heart. He did not mean to tell Miss Percival about it in so many words; but she was an understanding woman, and could make a great deal out of a very little. She read him as clearly as if she had seen into his heart. And so, I think, she did; and Dick's heart was so soft that a great deal came out of it which he had never known to be there. Once only she startled him greatly by an abrupt exclamation. In the very midst of something he was saying she broke out, interrupting him, in words of which he could not tell what they meant, or to whom they referred.

“This is the one I used to think I knew!” cried Mary to herself. “I was not deceived, only too early for him. This is the one I knew!”

Was she going out of her wits, the kind woman? But years after Dick had a glimmering of understanding as to what she meant.

Before Richard went away he told his mother what had happened. He was too much a man of the world to believe for a moment that such a secret could be kept or that Mary would not tell; and it was one of his principles, when anything unpleasant could be said about you, to take care to say it yourself. Just before he bade her good-bye, he told Lady Eskside: “Don't say I never try to please you, mother,” he said; “I asked Mary to have me on Val's wedding-day——”

“Richard! Lord bless us! and Mary said——”

“No, thank you,” said Richard, with a laugh: and kissed his mother, and went away.

Lady Eskside, very full of this strange intimation, walked down the avenue to meet the old lord on his return from the station whither he had accompanied his son. She took his arm and they walked up together. "The train was in time, for a wonder, and he's off, Catherine," said the old lord. "So now you and me must settle down, as it's all over; and be thankful we have Dick to 'stand by the old folks,' as he says."

"Yes," said my lady, a little *distracte*; "but I've something to tell you. Richard asked Mary before he went away—"

"Asked Mary? What? And she told you, my lady? She should not have told you; unless she consented, and I doubt that," said the old lord.

"He told me, and she refused him. She was not blate to refuse my Richard. Should I say anything about it?" asked my lady, leaning heavily on her old lord's arm, for the path was steep and tried them both.

Lord Eskside laughed, his eyes twinkling under his eyebrows. "They're quits now, or more," he said; "and I would not say but something might come of it yet."

The avenue was very steep; it tried them both as they went up slowly leaning on each other. When they stopped to take breath, they both spoke, the same thought coming to their minds at the same moment. "The house will be dull without Val," Lady Eskside said with a sigh. "When the bairns are gone, the house grows quiet," said her husband. Then they set forth again and climbed the last turn to their own door, holding each other up with kind mutual pressure of their old arms. Both of them were beyond the measure of man's years on earth. "The bairns come and the bairns go—but, thank God, you and me are still together, Catherine," said the old lord.

THE END.

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